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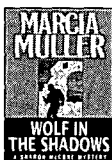
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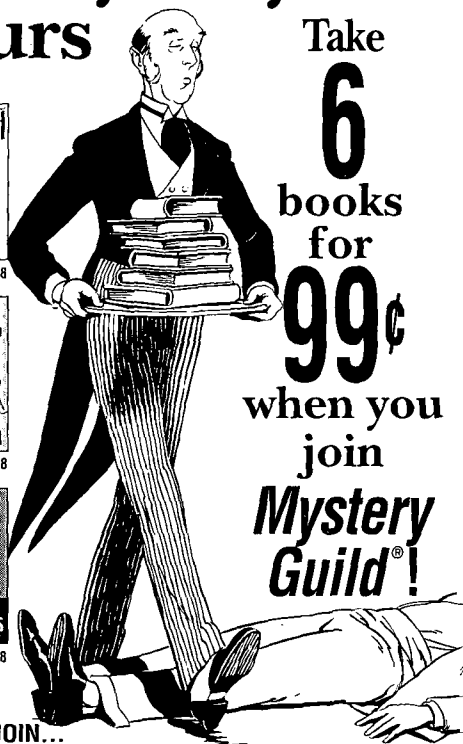
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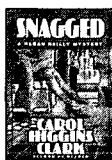
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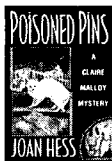
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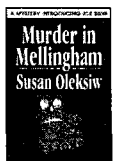
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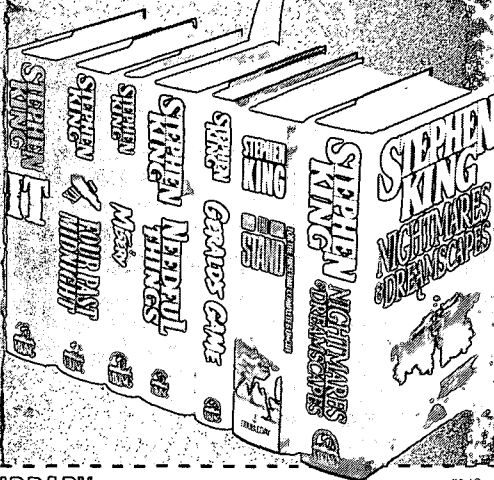
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# EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

**W**e have no fewer than four authors to introduce in this issue, whose stories come to us from the Southwest, the South, New England, and old England.

Many of you are no doubt already familiar with the novels and stories of John Maddox Roberts, author of "Lotto." *SPQR*, published by Avon in 1990, was nominated for an Edgar for Best Paperback Original Novel in 1991; it was followed by three more novels also set in Rome of the first century B.C. The most recent: *Temple of the Muses* (Avon, 1992).

Mr. Roberts, who has written a number of science fiction novels and short stories as well, some of them published in our sister magazine *Asimov's*, presently lives in Virginia but has spent time in Scotland, Mexico,

and London. "I've worked as a forester on Lord Roseberry's estate in Dalmeny, Scotland, sailed on a Scottish trawler, and was a night watchman at the Albuquerque zoo." He was a Green Beret who served in Vietnam.

"Lotto" (an excellent story) is set in contemporary America, but in the Mid-December issue we will bring you a story in the *SPQR* series, with a clever mystery from ancient Rome.

Caitlin Burke, author of "Virus," presently resides in England. "My husband and I live in a rambling 14-room house in rural Suffolk, England. The house was built in 1680 on the commons land. Old court records show the builder was fined 50 guineas for violating the law." They have traveled ex-

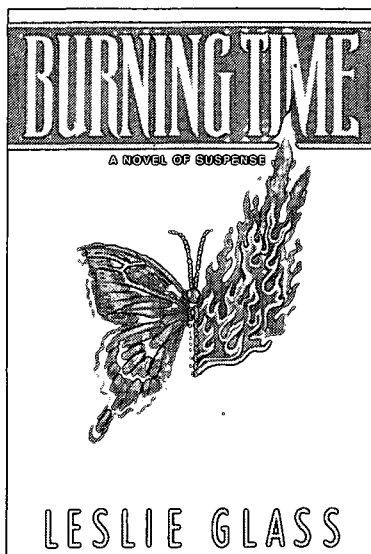
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As he stalks his  
"perfect woman"  
Det. April Woo  
stalks him.

To the flirtatious co-ed, he was an Adonis. To the ambitious starlet, an avid fan. But to NYPD detective April Woo, the alluring man with the movie-star looks was the most tormented and cunning butcher she had ever encountered. *The Silence of the Lambs* meets *The Joy Luck Club* in this chilling suspense novel featuring the debut of a brilliant detective facing the challenge of her life.



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FICTION

# Lotto

by John Maddox Roberts





**R**oad gang work wasn't bad, except it was so hot. The kudzu and wild rose grew thick on the highway embankments, and they'd been cutting away at it all day with long-handled brush hooks. Middle of August and about a hundred degrees out. Still, it was better than sitting around in the county jail with Tyler Brooks riding your butt and Deputy Ernie Sydham looking for every little opportunity to use his rubber sap on you. Hurt like hell and left hardly any marks.

Elmont Riggs took a couple of halfhearted swipes with his brush hook. Harshaw wasn't watching and didn't care much anyway. He stood by on the bus, his long-barrelled shotgun propped on his hip next to his fat gut, shooting the breeze with the driver.

"Look at that fatgut dep-pity," Orval Caniff said, sweat running down his face. "Man could jump over there'n whack him down afore he get that shotgun off his hip." He took a wide swipe and sheared the growth off cleanly a couple of inches from the ground. "Could take a man's leg clean off with one a these hooks." Orval liked to talk mean, but they didn't let the dangerous ones out to work on the road.

"That's why Tyler ain't with us," Elmont said. "'Cause he'd whack Harshaw in a heartbeat, probably me and you right after."

"That's the Lord's own truth," Orval owned. Tyler Brooks was awaiting trial for murder. He'd killed two men from Hampton County who'd tried to stiff him on a crack deal, then shot a state trooper who pulled him over because he had a taillight out. It was rough on the trooper, but you had to expect that sort of thing when you stopped Tyler Brooks right after he'd wasted a couple of people.

"Mr. Harshaw?" Jesse Sutton sang out. "Bein' it's so hot, could we get us some Co'Colas?"

"Got plenty of water," Harshaw said, gesturing at the corrugated, galvanized iron cooler that sat by the door of the bus.

"Water lacks the fortifyin' sugar required by laborin' men," Jesse said.

"Well, it's sure-God hot enough," Harshaw said, glancing up toward the sun as if seeking confirmation that it was, indeed, hot. Light flashed from the lenses of his mirrored shades. "Elmont, you collect the boys' cash and run on up to the store. Don't linger."

Elmont had only two more days to serve, so he wasn't

likely to try anything funny. There were four on the gang besides himself, and they dug through their pockets, coming out with change and a few small bills.

"They sell lott'ry tickets up at that store?" Buddy Dixon asked.

Elmont squinted up the road. There was a sign out front of the store with three numbered balls on it. "Looks like they do."

"I got enough for a Coke and a couple of numbers. Pick me up a ticket." Buddy handed him three bills. "Twenty million on the drawin' tonight."

"They don't give you the money all at once," Tasker Perry said. "They spread it out over twenty years."

Buddy shrugged. "Million a year for twenty years. Reckon I could live with that. Worth two bucks, anyway."

"I got a five here, Elmont," Orval said. "Pick me up a full ticket. Never mind the Coke."

"Me, too," Jesse said. "But I want that Coke. And no diet stuff, neither."

"What the hell," Tasker said. "Get me . . ." he dug out a wadded-up bill and some quarters. ". . . three numbers."

Elmont took their money. "How 'bout you, Mr. Harshaw? You want a lottery ticket?"

"That gamblin's pure wickedness," he scowled. "It was the

ruination of the state when they voted that lott'ry in."

"Every man's entitled to his own opinion," Orval told him. "My opinion's that five dollars to win twenty million's a cheap gamble."

"They say your chances of gettin' hit by lightnin's better," Tasker said.

Orval said, "You always see the gloomy side. I seen two men hit by lightnin'. It ain't all that rare."

Elmont trudged on up the hill toward the store, thinking about being back out in three days. Charlene had been by the day before, said Debbie and Scott had about forgot what their daddy looked like. She wouldn't bring them to the jail to visit, said she didn't want them to be around all those lowlifes. He thought she was being hard on people, most of them just down on their luck, but at least she didn't hold it against him that he'd got four months for laying out Breckenridge Tolliver with a tire iron. Breck had been beating up on his wife, who was Charlene's sister.

"I'm not saying he didn't have it coming, honey," she'd said right after he was arrested. "but parting his hair with a tire tool right on the courthouse steps was sort of indiscreet."

The store sat right inside the state line. That made it a popular place because fifty feet away they didn't allow Sunday beer sales and there was no state lottery. But the place was empty when Elmont went in. He took some cold pop cans from the glass-fronted refrigerator chest and went up to the front. The fat proprietor got behind the cash register and punched the keys.

"That'll be two fifty. Anything else?"

Elmont paid him, then dumped the rest of the money on the counter. "I want some lottery tickets, but you're gonna have to bear with me. Everybody's buying their own ticket, and they all give me their spare change."

The man chuckled, making his chins shake. "Ain't like I got customers need my attention, is it?"

Elmont looked around. "I thought there'd be a line here, with this big drawing tonight."

"I been turnin' them away since the Saturday drawin'. Machine's been on the blink. Repairman from the state just left. Let's see if it'll work now."

"Let me have one with five numbers." That was Orval's. The machine whirred and clicked, then extruded a pink slip three inches on a side. The numbers were in five lines, six

two-digit figures in each line, from ought-one to forty-four.

"Now let me have three more." That was for Tasker. Then he got two for Buddy and one for Jesse. He took out the five dollar bill Charlene had slipped him the day before and got five for himself.

"That be all?"

"Just a minute." He looked in his wallet and found the folded-up ticket he'd bought a couple of weeks earlier. On the second line, three figures were underlined. You had to match all six to win the big prize, but three matches got you a free ticket. He handed it over. "Let me have one more." The machine whirred and clicked again, and Elmont stuck his two tickets into his wallet and went back out into the hot day.

Back with the gang, he passed out the Cokes and gave each man the ticket he'd paid for. They sat around for a few minutes, drinking and talking, then went back to cutting brush. Three hours later they filed back onto the bus: five sweaty, dusty men in gray coveralls and the bright orange vests they had to wear doing road work.

The evening was like every other evening. They shuffled through the chow line and ate tasteless food off stamped steel trays, smoked cigarettes and

watched television in the day room. They were all in there together, about thirty of them, moonshiners and car thieves and honest but unlucky men like Elmont, and one certified murderer. They were all awaiting trial or sentencing, or doing a little county time.

Buddy and a few others had a poker game going, and Elmont watched them for a while until Tyler Brooks joined the game. He was a biker and his lawyer had made him cut his hair and shave off his beard so he wouldn't look so scary to the jury, but it wasn't much improvement. He just looked pure mean. He shoved Elmont aside to take a vacated chair.

"Excuse me, tire iron," Tyler said, pronouncing it *tar arn*. Since Elmont was in for a sort-of violent offense, Tyler felt it was a threat to his prestige. He never passed up a chance to ride Elmont, but Elmont wasn't rising to the bait, not with just two more days to go. He walked off and Tyler laughed behind him, haw-haw-haw. He refused to let it bother him. Soon he'd be out, and Tyler would likely be doing life without parole in the state pen. He might even get the death penalty if the state trooper took a turn for the worse and died. They probably wouldn't fry him just for the two boys from Hampton

County, who'd been citizens about on a par with Tyler Brooks.

Right about eleven twenty the Channel Five news broke from the sports report for a commercial, and the state lottery drawing came on. The inmates and even a couple of the guards crowded into the day room. Just about everybody had managed to get hold of a ticket or two since last week's drawing. The state lottery introduction, three numbered balls dancing around to music, faded out, and there stood a shapely woman with teased blonde hair next to a clear plastic box. The bottom of the box was full of balls like ping-pong balls with numbers on them.

"Welcome to Lotto!" the woman said, smiling to show every one of her teeth. "Tonight's Lotto jackpot is approximately twenty point three million dollars!" There was a whoosh of air, and the balls began jumping around in the bottom of the box. One ball jumped up the first tube on the left and was caught in a cage at its top. The woman turned the ball so its number faced the camera.

"Tonight's first Lotto number is twenty-two!" Then, in quick succession: "The second number is thirty-five. The third number is six. The fourth is eleven. The fifth is forty-two.



The sixth is twenty-seven. That concludes tonight's Lotto drawing." The screen flashed back to a commercial, and everyone checked their tickets.

"Got three," somebody said. "That's a free ticket next time."

Elmont took out his ticket and went through the five sets of numbers. No lightning this time, not even enough matches for a free ticket.

"Okay, lights out, everybody," Deputy Ernie Sydhann announced. He swatted his rubber sap against his leg as the men filed out of the day room and eyed Elmont going past. Ernie and Breckenridge Tolliver were close, rumored to be involved in a lot of shady deals all over the county. Ernie made it a point to keep Elmont miserable. Just as Elmont passed Ernie, he felt a flash of pain in the back of his leg, like a dog bite.

"Step a little faster there, Riggs," Ernie grinned. Tyler laughed, and the others looked away, shamefaced. Elmont clamped his teeth down tight and kept on walking. Two more days, he thought. That's all I have to stand.

Later, back in the little cell he shared with Orval, Elmont remembered the extra ticket he had, the one with a single set of numbers. He dug the ticket out of his wallet, then the piece of paper where he'd jotted down

the winning numbers. The lights were out so he took out his Zippo lighter and flicked it on. On the ticket the numbers were in numerical order and he checked them off against the numbers on the paper.

There was ought six, then eleven, then twenty-two. Lucky after all. That was another free ticket. Then twenty-seven. Four matches was worth fifty dollars or more. He suppressed a laugh. There was thirty-five. Five matches was worth better than a thousand. He'd only once matched four. He was sweating a little, and his insides felt funny as he squinted at the last number.

"What you doin', Elmont?" Orval said. He was in the upper bunk and couldn't see.

"Nothin'," Elmont said, louder and sharper than he'd intended.

"Well, seein's you need so long to light up a cigarette, light one up for me." Orval leaned out over the edge of the bunk with a cigarette in his lips. Elmont snapped the hot lighter on again and Orval had to hold his hand steady to get the cigarette lit.

"You got the shakes, Elmont?"

"Just thinking about getting out of this place," he said. "I swear if it was more'n two days I'd go crazy."

"Well, I envy you. I got two more months. But then I don't got Tyler and Sydham ridin' me. I swear they got it in for you. Kill you if they could get away with it."

"I ain't giving 'em the chance."

Elmont waited, his heart thumping too fast, while Orval smoked his cigarette and stubbed it out. When he was asleep, Elmont sat up and got out the lighter, the slip of paper, and his Lotto ticket. By the unsteady light he looked at the last number. It was forty-two.

For a few seconds he almost passed out. He breathed real hard, and he shook all over. Then he knew he was being a fool. It was hard to see those little bitty numbers in good light, much less by a cigarette lighter. And he'd probably copied the numbers down wrong anyway. Tomorrow he'd look again and see he had maybe three matchups, four at the most. That was okay. He and Charlene could use fifty bucks.

But when he lay back down, he felt a rush so wonderful it was like what he'd heard people say about cocaine and heroin, or maybe like what the people down at the River Jordan Church felt when the Holy Spirit grabbed hold of them. He kept telling himself to forget it. He just couldn't be right about

those numbers. He couldn't be that lucky. No Riggs had ever been that lucky.

But his Uncle Shelby had been out hunting deer one day and was struck by lightning.

The next morning all the numbers looked the same, but Elmont still thought he might have copied them down wrong when the woman with the hair and the teeth had called them out. He was sure he couldn't be off by more than one, though. He had that thousand for sure.

He was sitting at breakfast, swirling a piece of cold pancake in watery syrup on the bottom of his tray, when somebody said, "I heard on the radio this mornin' the winnin' lott'ry ticket got sold right here in Blair County." Elmont stopped swirling.

"Wonder who got it?" Buddy said. "Sure as hell wasn't me."

Elmont tried to keep his voice steady. "Big drawin' like that, they prob'ly sold ten thousand tickets in this county. People sometimes come over the state line, pick up a hundred at a time."

Tyler Brooks looked real thoughtful.

Elmont found out that he couldn't swallow, so he took his tray to the garbage can, scraped the remains off it, and stacked it with the others on

the stainless steel counter next to the cleanup sink. He felt like he could float off the ground, and he fought to keep it under control as he went out into the day room. He lit a cigarette and waited with the others for the day's work assignments, and he thought about the twenty million dollars in his back pocket.

What could he and Charlene do with a million a year? It was hard to even think of it. It was like a fairy tale or a movie. There would be . . . what? A fine, big house with a lot of land, and cars, and the best schools for the kids. Maybe they'd travel, see the world. Most of all, there'd be no more missed payments, no more repossessions, no more swallowing his pride to ask for loans or just three more days to come up with the rent. None of that, ever again.

It felt good to think about it. Just get through the rest of this day, then tomorrow and tomorrow night, and they'd have it all.

Orval and Buddy came over to join him, then Tasker and Jesse. The five of them had been on the road gang for three weeks. Sydham came in from the office, but he wasn't carrying his usual clipboard.

"I want a couple you boys to get all the wastebaskets and bring 'em into the office. Lester,

Matthew, you two go get 'em." He turned to go back into the office.

"Mr. Sydham?" Tasker said. "You want us to report in for road crew?"

Sydham didn't turn around. "No outside assignments today." He went on into the office.

"What's that for, I wonder?" Jesse said, disappointed. "It's a good day out. They ain't callin' for no rain."

"Beats me," Elmont said, shrugging. Matthew went past him carrying two wastebaskets. The bottoms of both were littered with pink lottery tickets among the candy wrappers and Kleenex.

Elmont went back to his cell and sat on his bunk and thought hard. All of a sudden his back pocket didn't seem like such a good place for his twenty million dollars.

He looked all over the little cell. There weren't many hiding places. They were searched every week, looking for contraband. He got up and looked over the walls and floor. All he needed was a crack, one just big enough for a little slip of paper. It was all smooth concrete, not a crack anywhere. The bunks were solid angle iron, bolted to the wall. It was easy to find anything hidden in the thin mattress or pillow.

He thought about stories he'd heard, about how people hid things. He could roll it up in a condom or a balloon and swallow it, except he was fresh out of condoms and balloons and was willing to bet there weren't any in the whole jail. Forget about stashing it anywhere on his body. They could call a strip search any time they liked.

Mail it out? No, the way the inmates sent out mail was to give their letters to Ernie Sydhams, unsealed so he could read them. Maybe if Charlene would come to visit, he could slip it to her. But she wasn't planning on visiting with him so close to getting out. He could call her, tell her to come. But there was only one phone and it was wide open, no privacy. Besides, in the office they could listen in on all the inmates' conversations. They'd get suspicious if he all of a sudden called and begged Charlene to come see him.

Thinking about writing gave him an idea. He reached into a pocket of his coverall and brought out a Bic pen. He got up and leaned out the door and looked around. Nobody was paying any attention; they were all congregated in the day room talking. Carefully, using the tips of his fingernails, he pried up the little black cap on the end of the white plastic pen. It didn't come up easy, and he

fought the temptation to use his teeth. Teeth would leave marks. Finally the cap came loose, and he looked inside. The hole inside was maybe a quarter inch in diameter, with the tip of the ink filler about a half inch below the end.

He got up and looked out the door again. Still nobody coming this way. Quickly, he took the lottery ticket out of his wallet and rolled it up tight. He stuck one end into the pen and carefully eased it down, loosening his fingers and allowing it to unroll a tiny bit, to make a hole big enough for the ink filler to pass through. Then he slid it all the way in, reinserted the cap and pressed it down tight. The pen looked just like before, not a mark on it.

It wasn't much, but maybe it would escape notice for a while. People tended not to see things like throwaway pens. He thought about putting it behind his ear, but that might be too conspicuous, so he put it back in his pocket. Nothing to do but wait it out.

That evening he sat with a bunch of the others, watching TV and paying absolutely no attention. Conversation had been muted all day, the way it always was when routine changed. No visitors had been in all day, no explanations given. The local news came on,



and the blow-dried, yuppie-looking announcer said nobody had come forward to claim the record jackpot in the state lottery.

"Now, ain't that strange," Deputy Sydham said. He was standing in the doorway of the day room, leaning against the frame, arms folded, his rubber sap stuck beneath his belt. "Now, that was me holding that ticket, I'd be on the first plane to the state capital. I'd be campin' out on the doorstep at the lottery office, time they opened up in the mornin'."

"People do it all the time," Elmont said. "They lay low a while, get an unlisted number, talk things over with a lawyer. Besides, there's some that bought a couple hundred dollars' worth prob'ly still goin' over all their tickets." He decided he was talking too much and shut up.

Tyler Brooks chuckled. He was sitting right behind Elmont, who had been too preoccupied to notice. "They'd be smart to hire 'em a whole troop of bodyguards to escort 'em around, if anyone knows about it. Funny thing about lott'ry tickets, they's no name on 'em. Don't matter who bought that winnin' ticket. All's matters is who got it in his fist when he shows up at the state lott'ry office."

Elmont just kept quiet. Everybody else was keeping pretty quiet, too.

That night they were locked down in their cells. Elmont tried to sleep but couldn't. He tried to dream about what he was going to do with all that money, but all he could think about was whether he was going to live to spend it. He'd almost managed to get some sleep when the door jerked open.

"You two come on down to the office." It was Sydham, slapping his sap against his leg.

"What's this about?" Orval said sleepily, climbing down off his bunk.

Sydham laid the sap alongside Orval's jaw, and he fell to one knee. "I'll be askin' the questions. Best remember that. Now get your clothes on."

They went ahead of him to the office. The place was dead quiet. If anyone else was awake, they were keeping it to themselves. All Elmont could feel was the Bic pen, big as a crowbar in his pocket. In the office they found Buddy, Tasker, and Jesse waiting and looking scared. In front of the desk there was a wastebasket and its bottom was full of pink lottery tickets, each one carefully in two. Sydham took his seat behind the desk. Elmont

looked at the clock behind him. It was three A.M.

"I got some real serious matters to discuss with you boys," Sydham said. "Now it seems there's a winnin' lottery ticket in this jail and I don't figure some lowlife jailbird needs no twenty million dollars. If one of you'll turn it over, we can reach some sort of accommodation."

"Why should one of us have it?" Tasker said. "There must be twenty, thirty places sells lott'ry tickets in this county."

"Wasn't just any store," Sydham said. "It was that one up on the state line where you got your tickets."

"Last drawin' was Saturday," Tasker said. "There could've been a thousand tickets sold out of that store before we got ours. And they must've been sellin' 'em right up to drawin' time."

Sydham shook his head. "His machine was busted. Them tickets you got was the first he sold for that drawin'. And it tore up again right after. Only ones he sold was the ones he sold you."

He looked straight at Elmont. "Now I know it was you bought all the tickets for you boys. The man at the store described you to me."

"Then won't it look funny, somebody else showing up with the winner?" Elmont said.

"Not a bit. He already told the reporters he don't remember who came in and bought them tickets, or even if it was more'n one buyer. See, my nephew, he's just sixteen, and he's ready to swear that man sold him some beer, and that man sure don't want to lose his beer license."

"I lost mine playin' poker after dinner, I swear it!" Tasker said, almost crying.

Buddy and Jesse dug around in their pockets and came up with two tickets. They handed them over. Sydham looked them over and tore each one in two pieces. "You two go on back to your cells and keep quiet." They got out quick.

"I throwed mine in the trash," Orval said.

"So'd I," Elmont said.

"One of you is lying," Sydham said, looking meaner than usual. "I'm gonna know which one pretty quick."

"Where's Sheriff Blake?" Elmont asked.

Sydham came around from behind the desk and hit Elmont six times, hard shots with the sap on his shoulders and back. He went down and made a ball of himself on the floor, covering his head with his arms.

"Sheriff Blake's got better things to do than socialize with jailbirds." Sydham was breathing hard. "He plays politics

over to the courthouse. This here jail's my territory, and I own it and all of you. Best not forget that. Get up."

Elmont stood. The other two wouldn't look at him. They tried to act like they were somewhere else.

"Tasker, you and Elmont go on back to your cells. Orval, you stay where you are." Tasker and Elmont went out, and the door shut behind them.

"I swear that man's gone plumb crazy," Tasker said in a loud whisper.

"Twenty million can make people crazy all right," Elmont said. Back in his cell he waited, but Orval didn't come back. A couple of times he heard people walking up and down the corridor, but nobody said anything.

At roll call the next morning Orval wasn't there, and his name wasn't called. Elmont asked around and one of the cooks said, "I heard they took him off to the hospital early this mornin'. He was buck naked and bloody all over. Sydham says he went crazy last night and tore off his clothes an' smashed himself into the wall till he knocked himself out."

As if that didn't sound bad enough, Tasker looked like he'd been run over by a truck.

"Sydham?" Elmont asked.

"Uh-uh. 'Bout a hour after we left the office, Tyler come into my cell and run Marvin out and pounded me half to death." He tried a weak little laugh, but it didn't come out too well. "I figure I'm tough as some, but Tyler ain't nobody you want to mess with. Elmont, if you got that ticket, I sure wish you'd give it to 'em."

Elmont didn't say anything. He picked up a pad and went to one of the little steel tables bolted to the floor of the day room and pretended to be writing a letter. After about ten minutes Tyler Brooks slid into the chair across from him. He was expecting it. They'd been locked down last night, so Sydham had let Tyler out. He wouldn't have worked Orval over alone.

Tyler grinned. "How's it goin', tar arn?"

"Not bad. Be out tomorrow."

"Maybe. You hand over that lott'ry ticket and you'll just waltz right out of here."

"Don't have it."

Tyler grinned some more. "Guess you figure you're tougher'n your friends. You a tough one, tar arn? Tasker didn't last long, he's a weak one. I know he don't have it. Orval, now he lasted most of the night. How long'll you last?"

"You won't have much use for the money where you're goin', Tyler."

"Now, that's where you're wrong. Ten million buy a man the best lawyer in the U.S.A. Nobody got to do much time if he got a good lawyer."

"Ten million? Sydham won't split fifty-fifty with biker trash like you." No sense crawling now. It hadn't done Tasker or Orval any good.

Tyler lost his grin. "Be seein' you tonight, tar arn." He got up and left. Five minutes later Sydham came in.

"Shakedown! Everybody get to your cells and stand by your bunks. Now!"

Elmont laid the pen on the table next to the pad, like that was where he'd found it. He got up and walked back to his cell. After a while Sydham and two other guards came in and went over the cell, then strip-searched Elmont. While he was putting his clothes back on Sydham waved the other two out.

"You got that ticket, Riggs. Best hand it over now. Be a shame if anything happened, close to gettin' out as you are."

"If I'm not out of here by ten tomorrow morning, my wife will bring my lawyer here and you'll have some talking to do."

"See you tonight, jailbird." Sydham walked out.

A couple of hours later the shakedown was over. Elmont went back to the day room and

sat down at the table. The pen was next to the pad where he'd left it. He doodled on the pad for a while, then tore off a sheet of paper, folded it, and stuck it in his pocket. Then he put the pen in his pocket and got up. It was going to be a hell of a night.

At supper everyone was quiet and kept their distance. That suited him. He went through the chow line, filled his tray, and poured himself a cup of cherry Kool-Aid from a stainless steel pitcher. He ate in silence, then took his tray to the garbage can. The cup was still half full, and with his back to the room he took the folded paper from his pocket and dipped it in the Kool-Aid before dropping the cup in the sink.

While the rest watched TV, Elmont went back to his cell, unfolded the sticky paper, and waved it around until it was good and dry. It had come out a pale shade of pink. He hoped it would do. He tore it along the folds until he had even squares. He picked the two best, then went to the latrine and flushed down the excess paper. Back in his cell he used the pen to draw in some lines of numbers. They might do, he thought, from a few feet away under indifferent light. Then he lay back and waited.



Three hours after lights out he heard footsteps out in the corridor. They were locked down again. He sat up, pulled the bottom off his Zippo, and blotted it all over his two papers, soaking them with fluid. He put papers and lighter back in his pocket as the cell door opened.

Tyler stood there, grinning again, a kitchen carving knife in his hand. "Come along, boy. You don't want to miss the party."

Elmont got up and went out. Tyler poked him lightly in the back as they walked toward the office, the point digging in just enough to break the skin.

"I sort of hope you try to be tough, tar arn. We got till mornin', and Sydham says I can cut on you as long as it takes." He sniffed the air like a hound. "What's that smell?"

"Got a cold. Can't smell a thing."

Elmont didn't think he had much chance, but he had to try something. Ticket or no ticket, there was no way these two were going to leave him alive.

Sydham was waiting in the office, wearing his gun on his hip. Deputies never wore guns inside the jail. They went in, and Sydham closed the door. Then he turned and faced Elmont, who stood with his back to the desk. Tyler stood next to

Sydham, fingers flexing on the wooden haft of the knife.

"I'm about out of patience with you, Elmont," Sydham said. "You can give me that ticket right now, or you can wait till Tyler does some cuttin', but you're gonna give me that ticket."

Elmont said nothing.

"That's the way you want it," Sydham said, "then take your shoes off and shuck out of your clothes. Kick 'em over here."

"All right, all right." Elmont said, holding a hand up and not having to fake the shakiness in his voice. "I got it right here." He reached into his pockets and came up with a paper in one hand and the lighter in the other. He flicked on the lighter and held the paper two inches from it. "That smell you were askin' about, Tyler? It's lighter fluid." He touched the flame to the paper and tossed it away.

Tyler yelled and grabbed at the paper. He got it and shook it, blowing on it while it stayed aflame. Sydham drew his pistol and shot Tyler twice. The biker went down in a heap, and Sydham turned the gun on Elmont.

"Six. Man at the store says you bought six tickets, not five. That one you just set fire to was the loser, wasn't it? Now, you just hand over the winner." The gun stayed steady on Elmont's chest.

Elmont, already had the other paper palmed in his hand and he held it next to the flame. Sydham just grinned. "How long'll your fluid hold out, boy? Or how long before that lighter gets too hot to hold?" He thumbed back the hammer on the pistol. The clicks sounded as loud as the shots. Elmont had figured on getting the two of them fighting, maybe jump them then. He hadn't figured on the gun.

They stood there for what seemed to Elmont like a long time. The Zippo was getting hotter by the second. The flame got smaller, then began to smoke and flicker. He could see Sydham's finger tighten on the trigger.

That was when Tyler came up off the floor and jammed his knife into the deputy's side, just below the ribs. Sydham squawked and the two of them grappled and rolled around on the floor. The gun went off twice more, but Elmont couldn't tell which of them was hit. Somebody was, because no bullets bounced around the room.

Their struggling slowed down, and Elmont touched the

flame to the remaining paper and dropped it on the floor as he walked around them. He closed the door and walked back to his cell. Nobody called out to find out what the commotion was. He went into the cell and closed the door, thinking that he'd have to do something nice for Tasker and Orval. Looked like he could afford to, now. He stretched out on his bunk and slept real well.

"What happened in there last night?" The woman behind the desk had his release papers in front of her.

Elmont shrugged. "Ernie Sydham and Tyler Brooks had 'em a bad argument, looks like." He looked out through the plate glass window into the waiting room. Charlene sat there, smiling and waving at him. He grinned and waved back.

The woman turned the papers around on the desk. "We just need your signature right here." She pointed to a line at the bottom of the top page. She'd drawn a little *x* next to where he was supposed to sign.

He leaned over the desk and signed his name with his white plastic Bic pen.

FICTION

# Teamwork

by Stephen Wasylyk



Illustration by Pat Olstad

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The Haitian waiter was young, tall, wide shouldered, his hair gathered at the nape in a small ponytail. In his black jacket, black bow tie, and white shirt, he was the ultimate of cool, serving the women at the luncheon tables at Le Monde with a flourish sure to bring a large tip.

The stay-at-home segment of the sisterhood was making a day of it with morning shopping, French cuisine for lunch, and an afternoon of Beethoven at the concert hall across the street. Not that Beethoven turned them on all that much, but it did get them out of the house and allow them to clutch a drink at the next party and feelingly murmur, "Wasn't it just *wonderful*?"

Except for the two in the corner. The very plump one with the square Nordic face, wearing a print dress and wild blonde ringlets, was obviously nervous and feeling out of place. Easily intimidated. No complaint from her if he paid more attention to those at his other tables, but then he'd have to contend with her companion.

She was one step short of anorexic—dark hair cut so short it would have looked better on the waiter; high-cheekboned hollowed Slavic face, lips thin, eyes heavily made up. The cream-colored suit and red

scarf were fashionably correct but had nothing to do with the aura of competence and capability she'd have projected even in a tank top, shorts, and dirty walkers.

Wouldn't hesitate, that one, to cut him up if something displeased her, and loudly enough to bring Claude scurrying to the table. He certainly didn't need that, so he smiled and served with the grace and aplomb of someone expecting a very large tip indeed, noting that when he approached, all conversation ceased. No smattering of tidbits with which the others spiced their luncheons, like "I knew all along he was sleeping with her" or "Really, it was worth only a few thousand, can you believe it?"

No credit card. They paid in cash, splitting the bill. The tip was what he expected. Fifteen percent. Well, not exactly. They'd given themselves the break on the odd cents. Make it fourteen.

A very memorable pair.

Generally, only the job-bound dropped into the convenience store at six in the morning for a container of coffee and a doughnut, taking off again holding the hot coffee in one hand and steering with the other, menacing themselves

and all others with every sip that took their eyes off the road. What the hell. Saved ten minutes, didn't it?

Only the pear-shaped middle-aged blonde wearing the purple tights, flowered blouse, and green Eagles jacket had bought anything more. A half gallon of milk, a loaf of yesterday's bread, and a pack of cigarettes. And given the clerk an argument about the price of the cigarettes. Virginia Slims. She paid much less elsewhere.

The clerk, a middle-aged Anglo-Saxon of Welsh descent downsized from a defense contractor's payroll and whose daughter's college tuition now exceeded his annual income, wondered why the gods were punishing him. All he'd ever done was cheat on his income tax. Less than half the money, anticipating a shotgun every time a lone male walked in, and now a senseless argument with a woman old enough to know that if you wanted convenience, you paid for it.

Scowling, he watched her squeeze into her ratty looking, ugly green subcompact. Brake lights flashing as if she were wagging her tail at him in defiance, it hesitated under the outside fluorescents long enough for him to catch the name and the rear tag briefly. VW Jetta. Something A-1

something. A-1. Very appropriate. Anyone fifty pounds overweight who would appear in public in purple tights rated a high grade for nerve alone.

He flipped the morning paper to the classifieds. Had to be something better than this. If a holdup man didn't kill him, the customers would drive him nuts.

**A**t six fifteen, on the top floor of the parking garage, a thin woman placed in her purse the ticket dispensed by the automatic machine at the entrance. She removed the license tag, held in place with a pair of magnets, from the rear of the ugly green VW, climbed into a bright red minivan, and screeched down the exit ramp curves; the plate, the ticket for the minivan, and a five dollar bill on the seat beside her. She impatiently seized the fifty cents in change the attendant handed her and drove off.

The attendant, a small Colombian with a luxurious mustache, had seen her enter. Knowing that he'd shortly be inundated by a flood of all-nighters leaving for work, and having no facilities in the booth, he'd wisely slipped out to the men's room. Returning unnoticed, he'd had a good look at her when she reached for the

stub from the window of the green car. He was thoroughly puzzled when she left only a few minutes later in a bright red one. From his higher perch, he could plainly see the license tag on the seat beside her.

Surely this was strange, but then people in this country did many strange things. Did not the tag belong on the outside of the vehicle, not the inside? Yet, as she drove away, he saw the vehicle had a different one affixed. Where had the other come from? Perhaps the green car? That would mean she'd abandoned it. Cars were abandoned on the streets all the time in this crazy country. Beyond comprehension. Any car was worth several hundred dollars. Unfortunately, one seldom had the opportunity to drive one away before it was stripped. Could it be he'd stumbled across one that awaited him intact? It might be locked, of course, but that would be no problem for his cousin, who was so skilled at opening locked cars that he had the admiration of all, including the police. He would look for it when his shift was over.

He felt a thrill. If he found the car abandoned, he would have achieved one-half the American dream. Perhaps then he would achieve the other. He would find an abandoned house

that had not yet been destroyed.

Fifteen minutes later, the red minivan darted down a one-way street and stopped at an intersection long enough for the woman to hand the license tag out of the window to an overweight woman wearing purple tights.

The body was propped against the park oak like a nature lover who didn't mind getting the seat of his cream-colored slacks damp while he admired the spring sunrise.

Forty or so, thought Ganz. Dark brown sport shirt, gold chain showing in the open collar, small black mustache and a lot of black hair, brown Italian shoes.

Arroyo had fingered not one but two moneyless wallets from the hip pockets. The grained leather would retain no fingerprints, but whoever had extracted the currency might have touched a credit card or the glassine over the license, so he'd slipped them, open flat, into plastic bags.

Couldn't have been there long. If the tall, black, before-breakfast jogger dressed in the headband and expensive running suit—feet still churning in place as he talked to Arroyo—hadn't found him, the



nocturnal predators would have not only removed the wallets and chain, but lifted the corpse by the ankles and shaken the change from his pockets.

Ganz held an open wallet in each hand. The driver's license and credit cards in the one in his left said the victim was Marvin Maine, those in the one in his right said he was Martin Montana. If one I.D. was correct, the man hadn't shown too much imagination in selecting the other, even if it did allow him to retain his monogrammed personal possessions.

They did indicate, however, that Maine/Montana might have been engaged in something illegal, since few people had a legitimate reason for two names except those in show business born Oswald Grunky or Granola Schmeldheiser.

Ganz sat in the open door of the car and worked a wallet out, probing with a ballpoint for more information. Just as he finished, another car pulled up. The occupant, well on his way to achieving the girth of a Sumo wrestler, waddled up to him.

Rumor had it that family connections played a large part in Polansky's promotion to lieutenant, but no one could be found who would admit to be-

ing related to him by blood or marriage.

"Whadda hell you doin'?"

"Thinking that I'm getting tired of looking at dead people."

"Looking at dead people is part of the job. Whaddya got?"

"He was shot in the chest. Something like a 9mm or a .38. Where we don't know. Could have been right here on the road or somewhere else and driven here. No scuff marks showing he was dragged to the tree where he was found. Might have been carried, but the sod isn't soft enough to show footprints." He handed over the wallets. "These were in his hip pockets."

Polansky's lips moved as he read the names. "This guy a Dr. Jackal and Mr. Watchacallit?"

Leaving the jogger chugging away, Arroyo came up with his open notebook in hand, at least a dozen pairs of feminine eyes fixed on him with open awe rather than on the corpse. After all, in this city you could stumble over a corpse almost daily, but how often did one see someone who could have passed as Lorenzo Lamas? Many in the small knot of spectators were looking around for cameras, convinced this wasn't real at all but a scene from a forthcoming TV movie. Probably based on a true story.

"The jogger makes three circuits of the lake," said Arroyo. "Even though it wasn't full light the first time he passed, he's certain the body wasn't here. He saw it the second time around, which means someone propped him against the tree between six and six ten."

"How much you think the stiff weighs?" asked Polansky.

"One sixty, seventy," said Arroyo.

"Then you're looking for someone with muscle."

"Not necessarily," said Ganz. "Someone could have helped him over to the tree before he died. Depends on how long he lived after he was shot."

Polansky glared at him and stalked back to his car.

"Jogger see anything else?" asked Ganz.

"Structure your life around a schedule and you run into others whose schedule intersects with yours—"

Ganz held his head. "Ought to be a law against a guy who looks like Lorenzo Lamas taking a course in philosophy."

"—so you become familiar with whatever occupies your interstitial space at a given moment—"

*"What the hell did he see?"*

"The few cars that pass him every morning are familiar. In this neighborhood, late models and limos. A beatup VW Jetta

caught his eye. Ugliest green he ever saw, but then he says he hates green."

"What qualifies him as a critic?"

"He's an art director in an advertising agency."

Ganz grunted. "Like advertising art directors have good taste."

"He told me two things more. One, he thought he heard the car stop. Two, he picked up A-1 as part of the tag number."

"As I said, I've always thought very highly of art directors." Ganz looked at the man still jogging in place. "Does he ever stop?"

"Not until he hits the shower, otherwise he stiffens up."

"You'd better let him go before he has a heart attack and stiffens up permanently. We may need him as a witness."

When Arroyo returned, he indicated the wallets. "Find the next of kin in there, or do we go to the addresses blind?"

"I.D. cards under the licenses. Wives. One Heidi Maine and one Anastasia Montana."

"Two names, two wallets, two *wives*? Probably explains why he's dead. He pulled out the wrong wallet at the wrong time."

"Could be. First order of business is to notify the next of kin."

"Might as well go in alphabetical order."

Probably makes as much sense as the rest of this, thought Ganz.

The red minivan left the Merritt Parkway, wandered down a side road, and stopped on a bridge. The woman lifted the hood as if something was amiss, waited for a car to pass, casually dropped an automatic over the rail to the creek thirty feet below, closed the hood, and drove off.

It landed with a splash in a shallow spot three feet from an elderly man seated on the bank fishing, illegal this early in the season and with little chance of catching anything but it did get him out of the house the day Myrtle went beserk with her cleaning implements. A slow mover could get permanently maimed by a roaring vacuum cleaner.

The man looked at the automatic thoughtfully as he brushed a few droplets from his jacket. That solid pound of blued steel and walnut grips would have rendered him unconscious if it had hit him in the head. He sighed. People today just didn't give a damn.

He was also aware there was only one reason for someone to drop a perfectly good automatic

that could be sold on the streets for several hundred dollars into a remote creek. He unfolded his small fishing net, retrieved it as if it were a fish, and, holding it in the net, gathered up his tackle and headed for his car.

Guns falling from the sky always intrigued retired policemen.

It had been a long day for Ganz, made even longer by only toast and coffee for breakfast, no lunch, and a midafternoon slice of cold pepperoni pizza that bubbled in his stomach like the lava of a volcano threatening to erupt.

Part of that might be attributed to the reaction of the Irish beauty when he'd had to cancel their dinner date. Passing through the switching station, the heat of her response triggered several thousand inadvertant call-waiting signals, while quite a few brisk business conversationalists suddenly found themselves tuned in to husky-voiced females promising unspeakable delights. The story in the morning paper would be headlined MOMENTARY BLIP DISRUPTS PHONE SERVICE. If it had been long distance, a communications satellite would have wobbled in orbit.

Anastasia Montana hadn't been at her apartment. A

neighbor had directed them to her place of business—her antique shop. They were informed she'd been in New England for several days searching through old barns for battered eighteenth century chests of drawers and Shaker cabinets, something that antique dealers lived for.

A longhaired clerk of indefinite ethnic origin named Otis—who couldn't keep his eyes off Arroyo—determined that she had checked out of her motel at eight thirty. Had Otis met her husband? He came around occasionally. What did Martin do for a living? He really didn't know, but it couldn't have been very profitable. He had the impression that Martin appeared only when he needed money. At least, that was what he gathered from the shouting matches between the two. How long had they been married? Three years or so.

Anastasia was sure to call later to inform him of her whereabouts. If they would leave a phone number? Preferably Arroyo's, of course.

Ganz was accustomed to being ignored. It was better than being castigated, like on the occasion they had gone to the exclusive girls' school to speak with one of the teachers. Arroyo had been pursued through the halls by dozens of teenagers

shrieking, "It's him! It's him!," while the agitated headmistress had soundly berated him for bringing someone who resembled Lorenzo Lamas into a school like this. Good heavens! Didn't he know anything about young ladies?

Well, no. He didn't even know about their older sisters, which was why he always kept an escape route open.

Otis called Arroyo every hour on the hour to tell him he had yet to hear from Anastasia Montana.

Must be tangled in cobwebs in an old barn somewhere, so she had yet to learn she was a widow. Or a half widow. Ganz felt it wouldn't make much difference. A dedicated antiques dealer knew that husbands were far easier to find than battered eighteenth century chests of drawers and Shaker cabinets. Without even going to New England and looking through old barns.

They found Heidi Maine's address to be a 1920's bungalow fronted by a small patch of dead grass, a few scraggly azaleas which hadn't decided whether to bloom or die, and an ugly green VW Jetta parked on the street.

Who was always the first suspect? The spouse. Ganz checked the plate in the front while Arroyo checked the one in the

rear, numbers and letters of both mud-smearred except for A-1. Ganz placed a palm on the hood. Still very warm. The interior was well worn but spotless.

It looked like this could be an easy one.

Heidi was a short, very plump, natural Scandinavian blonde, wearing a flowered blouse and purple tights, and her grief was controlled, to say the least. She'd always felt poor Marvin would come to no good end, you see. Although he was a good provider—she had no complaint on that score—he wasn't a man for hearth and home; gone for several days at a time ever since they married six years ago. Which not only made her the senior wife but the only legal one.

What did he do for a living?

She didn't know, exactly. Some sort of salesman. Always talking about his sales routes, which took him to glamorous places like Buffalo and Rochester, she said wistfully.

Driving in to make the formal identification, Ganz casually asked where she'd been at six that morning. Being overcharged for a pack of Virginia Slims, she said indignantly. Where? At that convenience store up ahead. Arroyo promptly pulled in.

The clerk, smoldering because his relief hadn't bothered to come to work, but exhibiting a genial exterior—he'd been brought up always to be polite—took one look and said—Who could ever forget her?

Did you see her car? asked Ganz.

Ugly green VW Jetta. A-1 on the plate. Are you arresting her?

What for, asked Ganz.

The clerk glowered. For appearing in public in those purple tights.

Dry-eyed, Heidi had sadly shaken her head at the corpse of her erstwhile husband. Since it had yet to be confirmed, they did not mention the apparent existence of a second wife. She was sent home with a sympathetic policewoman.

"The M.E.'s preliminary says he was shot in the chest from left to right, with the gun two or three inches away," said Arroyo. "The slug went all the way through. If he was behind the wheel of a car someone could have simply opened the door. If he was in the passenger seat—"

Ganz bent his right wrist back at an awkward angle. "Would have to be a left-handed person."

"Unless Maine/Montana twisted. Bloodstains on his

shirt and hands and fluid pooling show you could have been right. He might have been walked to that tree because he took anywhere from fifteen to thirty minutes to die. It looks as though he was shot in the car while close to the park and the body dumped there because it was convenient. If so, there would be blood all over the front seat and the slug should still be there."

Which eliminated Heidi's car, even though the jogger's description matched. The interior exhibited only normal wear and tear, and according to the clerk, it—and Heidi—had been fifteen miles away.

Wasn't going to be as easy as they thought.

Since Maine/Montana didn't seem to have any visible means of support, they ran his fingerprints. The microchips in the computer sniffed, sorted, classified, sifted, and finally stated that Maine/Montana had a third name—Max Montopolous.

Max was a clever Greek gentleman who was well known to the authorities through a very long list of minor transgressions connected with the movement of controlled substances, for which he'd been arrested but never convicted. It would appear he shared most of what he made with Heidi, but ran to

Anastasia when he came up short. He was, thought Ganz, a man who liked performing on a high wire without a safety net.

If Anastasia found out, it would tend to make her very angry indeed, far angrier than if she'd discovered she was merely Wife Number Two. Angry enough to acquire a car and license plate matching Wife Number One's and attempt to pin the shooting of Max/Marvin/Martin on Heidi. She'd have absolutely no reason to anticipate that Heidi's craving for Virginia Slims would take her abroad in the early hours at the precise time she needed an alibi.

Arroyo smiled at a young rookie policewoman, who fainted.

Ganz pondered. Finding an identical model of the VW wouldn't be too difficult. One in ugly green might present a problem, since the ever-alert Germans would have discovered very quickly they'd misinterpreted America's taste in colors and exported subsequent models to less discriminating countries. But the duplicate license plate? Not too easy.

A uniformed man escorted an emaciated woman with a short haircut toward them.

"I'm Anastasia Montana," she said, touching her eyes



with a delicate handkerchief. "Otis said—"

At least Heidi hadn't pretended.

She left with Arroyo to identify the body. Until she eyeballed the remains, they couldn't be absolutely certain Marvin was indeed Martin.

**T**he attendant found the car on the top level of the garage.

As he expected, no plate. He smiled broadly. Abandoned. Now his for the taking. He tried the door. Not even locked. Starting it without a key would be no problem for his cousin.

He didn't wonder why it had been left in the garage where it would be hidden for a few days, rather than in the street where a cruising police car could notice it, until he looked at the passenger's seat.

He knew bloodstains when he saw them, having left some of his own on a few walls before he managed to sneak out of his homeland. He also knew there was no country in the world where being caught driving a car with a bloodstained seat wouldn't get you into big trouble immediately. If not shot on the spot.

The car could not be his.

He strode down the ramps sadly and slowly. The police

should be told, but they would ask questions about the car and the woman and the plate beside her and what she was driving. Had he not heard many times—do not become involved, look out for Number One, you come first, baby? And those doing the talking had been *citizens*.

An illegal could not afford such attention. Yet someone's life had been taken in that car, and the taking of a life should not go unpunished.

His heels clacked on the cement; a small man who had fled from a country where the taking of lives had become so commonplace one did not question it.

By keeping silent, would he not encourage it to become the same here?

**A**nastasia Montana stated that the body was that of her husband Martin.

To learn he'd married her without divorcing his first wife wasn't the least bit surprising. It had taken her several months after the wedding to discover he wasn't all he claimed to be, but in her estimation he was simply one of those lowlifes who took advantage of trusting women and was really not worth killing. At least by her. She could see

where she'd been a fool, but unfortunately, ladies with Russian blood had always been far too susceptible to romance for their own good. Others might not have her objectivity, of course. Still, she retained a bit of affection for him. He could be quite charming. If his first wife didn't claim his body—

Why shouldn't she claim his body?

Some women can be quite resentful—implying that when it came to a motive, Wife Number One should be first on his list.

We're considering everything, said Ganz. How had *she* spent last night and this morning?

Working. If Otis hadn't called, she would never have returned so soon. Although she had left on her treasure hunt only two days ago, she'd already discovered a folding table with a broken leg, which could be repaired, and a chest so worm-eaten it was sure to bring a high price.

She didn't mention whether she'd found them in an old barn.

She seemed eager to give Arroyo the names of her motel and contacts, but then women were always eager to give Arroyo what he asked for.

Trailing restrained grief, goodwill to all, and the faint scent of an expensive perfume,

she left, no doubt to get the table leg repaired.

"She did it," said Arroyo. "Found out about Heidi and tried to pin it on her. Not sure, though, that being disappointed in love was more of a motive than finding he was using her as his friendly local banker."

Ganz grunted. No doubt in his mind, either. Proof was another matter. She wasn't too concerned about what they'd find at the motel. Her word against theirs unless they could place her in the city. What they needed was the car, the gun, that license plate.

What they needed was a break. Which they never seemed to get. You'd think that just once—

Goldberg, the sergeant at the desk downstairs, was partially deaf, which permitted him to be highly selective in listening to complaints. Like others hard of hearing, he made sure he spoke loudly enough for himself to hear. He didn't really need the phone. Ganz held it a foot from his ear.

"Some anon-ee-muss foreigner with a funny accent just called," Goldberg bellowed. "Said if we were looking for a small green car with a bloody front seat, we'd find it on the top level of the parking garage on—"

Five feet away, Arroyo had heard him. He was already moving.

Ganz followed more slowly. If you lived right—not that he could claim that. There was the Italian sensation in Philadelphia about whom the Irish beauty knew nothing, and who certainly didn't know about her redhaired competition. If they ever met and compared notes, he and Marvin/Martin would be sharing a protoplasmic handshake.

No plate on it, but it was the car, all right, and only two people could have known it was there. The person who'd driven it and—

"The anon-ee-muss foreigner had to be one of the attendants," said Arroyo. "Unless it ran them down, no one else would bother to look."

The anon-ee-muss foreigner denied everything until Ganz assured him he had nothing to worry about from Immigration. Obviously, the office had quietly been eliminated to solve the budget deficit, which was why the country was flooded with so many strange faces and so many strange accents.

The Colombian wasn't quite certain of that, but it *was* a strange country. He'd heard recently of people actually paid for not working.

The rhythm of the accent finally began to make sense. A dark-haired woman with hair like a boy had driven the car in and departed in another; larger, red, shaped like a box with a sloping front. On the seat beside her was the tag from the green one.

The times and distance from the park could have been scripted by a screenwriter.

Ganz was beginning to feel that, in gratitude for his good fortune, a little personal reformation might be in order—like giving up the Italian sensation. But not yet. True, they had the car, but proving in court who had driven it would be difficult with a witness who would require a translator. They needed more—like the gun and how she'd managed that duplicate license plate.

Arroyo said he was going home, which Ganz doubted. Arroyo slept in more beds than George Washington. He went back to the office where a left-over sugar doughnut stoked the bubbling lava in his stomach. A note on his desk asked him to call a sergeant with whom he'd once worked.

The sergeant said he'd talked to an old friend named McTavish, who had called to tell him of an unusual occurrence in an otherwise dull retirement. He'd been sitting under a bridge in

Connecticut that morning when a discarded Beretta automatic had almost hit him in the head. Now, getting hit on the head with a pistol while you were active was part of the job, but after retirement? What was the world coming to? He'd turned the gun over to the state police, of course.

Considering that his friend had almost been conked only an hour and a half after the body was found in the park, the sergeant wondered if Ganz might be interested.

So interested that the sergeant could expect delivery of a case of beer the next day. Real beer, not that light stuff.

Ganz called forensics and asked them to check the slug found in the car with one from a Beretta in the hands of the Connecticut state police, placed his feet on his desk, clasped his hands over his stomach, and slept, oblivious to the din which sounded like the second floor in the Tower of Babel.

In the morning, a baggy-eyed Arroyo said, "Now all we have to do is work out how she managed that plate. Motor vehicles says there are no other plates with A-1 within a hundred miles, so—"

Polansky, chewing on a sardine on rye for breakfast, said, "Had to come off the fat blonde's car."

"Both plates were on it," said Arroyo.

Polansky licked his fingers. "Yeah, but who knows if they were when the clerk saw her? He saw only the rear one. So did the jogger."

"She could have borrowed the front one without Heidi's knowing," said Ganz thoughtfully, "but she wouldn't have had time to replace it."

"Ever hear of *co-oper-A-shun*? If both these broads had something to gain from knocking off their mew-chew-al husband, they could have got together and worked out the ugly green car and license plates as a scam to confuse a couple dumb detectives like you. If they did, you better figure it out, because all you're doing now is giving some defense lawyer a new model of one of them German cars what sound like a intestinal disorder."

At their desks, Arroyo held his head in his hands. "I must have had a bad night. I think I heard Polansky say something that makes sense."

"Insurance," said Ganz. "Look into it while I check something out."

On a large street map, he marked the park, the convenience store, and the fastest route Anastasia would have used to reach Connecticut.

Now with Anastasia zooming along here, and Heidi working her way down from the convenience store... their paths would intersect about here... where Anastasia could zip off the parkway, circle the block, and get right back on after returning the plate to Heidi....

Only one exit made sense, but maps didn't tell you everything. He'd have to see for himself.

He came down off the ramp, turned right, then right again on the first street he came to, narrow and one-way. It intersected another; wider, lined with small shops. Double-parked cars and people ambling along carrying plastic bags and packages indicated the shops were all doing very well in a depressed economy. He turned left, stopped at a light, turned left again on a boulevard where the sidewalks were so crowded the pedestrians spilled out onto the street. He could have run over representatives from a wide variety of ethnic groups without even trying. If he continued straight, he'd be at Heidi's house in fifteen minutes. At five miles an hour, blowing his horn and exchanging cheerful insults with other drivers, he turned left

again. The ramp back to the expressway was just ahead.

Very clever, those ladies. But this was a big city neighborhood, in many ways as defined and close knit as a small town. Strangers attracted wary glances.

He turned down the one-way street again, pulled up on the sidewalk under a No Parking sign, and started canvassing the shops.

What time did they open? Who might have been around at six thirty yesterday morning?

If it had been an election, the small Vietnamese restaurant on the corner would have won unanimously. Them people never sleep.

Enticing odors surrounded him when he entered. A small elderly man with a brush haircut, a wizened face, and a white apron took one look at him and retreated through the swinging doors into the kitchen, driven by the universal instinct that a man of Ganz's size and bearing represented a profession best avoided.

He was replaced by a lithe young woman wearing a very fashionable business ensemble who approached with the grace of a ballet dancer. Bangs and neck-length glossy black hair framed a flawless oval face.

Ganz heard the soft chiming of cymbals, the gentle notes of unfamiliar stringed instruments. Veiled dancers swayed. Faraway places with strange sounding names tugged at him. Slowly he sank into the deep, black, mysterious pools of her Oriental eyes.

"Can I help you?"

Not noticing she had no accent, he took a few deep breaths like a swimmer coming up for air.

He understood that there weren't very many people around at six thirty in the morning but that the restaurant was open. Would she have been here?

No, but her uncle was. Why did he want to know?

He cleared his throat with a growl that made several patrons cringe but brought amusement to the exotic dark eyes.

Might her uncle have noticed a small ugly green car, a heavy blonde woman wearing purple tights, or both?

She disappeared into the kitchen and returned in a few minutes.

He had indeed. Only recently arrived in the country, he was amazed at the strange sights. One of the strangest was the fat woman in purple tights pacing back and forth until her friend arrived and handed her some-

thing. The friend appeared to have lost most of her hair through starvation. If they were friends, couldn't they have shared their food?

The D.A. would need two translators, thought Ganz, but what the hell.

And did strange sights amaze her?

Wharton School MBA's have seen it all, she said.

Ganz grinned. Since he'd eaten little since yesterday morning, he was very hungry. What might a Wharton School MBA suggest?

She smiled. Buy American. How about a Spanish omelette?

Floating as he followed her to a table, he wondered if they'd miss him if he stayed for lunch, dinner, and a late snack. Or forever.

**A**rroyo discovered there was a hundred thousand in insurance on Marvin Maine, with another hundred on Martin Montana. Both double indemnity and taken out only a few months ago.

Slowly, it came together. The blood in the car was identical with Marvin/Martin's. The slug recovered from the seat matched the Beretta that had almost crowned the retired policeman under the bridge, and the Beretta was registered to



Anastasia so she could protect herself when a holdup man came in to steal her antiques. Along with the statements of the illegal Colombian and the ancient Asiatic chef, they had more than enough.

Heidi smiled, smoked Virginia Slims and said nothing, leaving it all to Anastasia. As an antiques dealer, she was accustomed to answering awkward questions.

Anastasia said it was all an accident. All she wanted was for him to repay some of the money he owed her, but he'd grabbed the gun and it went off. Like this. She demonstrated with her left hand.

Why did she leave him in the park?

The poor man had been in such pain that she'd helped him to the tree so that he could be more comfortable while she went for help.

But she hadn't gone for help, had she?

Well, no, because as soon as she'd set him down, she'd been horrified to see he'd expired. She knew they'd blame her, of course, just as they were doing now, so she panicked and fled.

How did she explain the ugly green car and the A-1 license plate?

Oh, that old thing. She'd bought it to save her good minivan from the bumps and

bruises of city driving. You know how careless city drivers were. But she couldn't run it without a plate, could she? Dear Heidi—

Dear Heidi? They were friends?

Why not? What greater bond than sharing the same husband? Anyway, Heidi had been nice enough to lend her one. Of course, since those horrid stains on the seat—they never come out, you know—made it impossible to drive, she'd abandoned the car and returned the plate to Heidi.

At six thirty in the morning?

Well, Heidi had to go out for cigarettes anyway, didn't she?

If it had been an accident, why had she carted the gun to Connecticut and dropped it from a bridge?

She'd been driving along, knowing that the police would be just *looking* for someone to blame, when she realized that having the gun would make things a bit awkward, so she'd tossed it away. As any sensible person would.

They almost applauded when she was through. The woman could convince anyone that Alexander Hamilton's quill pen was responsible for a spot on a folding table she'd bought in K-Mart on sale.

Given the state of the judicial system, no one would bet that

Heidi would get more than a stern lecture for lending out her license plate, while Anastasia would probably plea bargain herself into ninety days for disturbing the peace and a hundred hours community service instructing the homeless in how to spot a valuable antique.

Unless they could really pin down a Swedish-Russian conspiracy.

The MBA had expressed a partiality toward authentic French cuisine, unavailable in her almost-authentic Vietnamese restaurant. Part of her heritage. Wonderful. The Irish beauty didn't like French food at all. Little likelihood of running into her at Le Monde.

Where Ganz gazed deep into her mysterious eyes and spun the tale of two wives, one Swedish, the other Russian, who plotted to murder their bigamous Greek husband in a German car with an Italian automatic; brought to justice by a Hispanic and Swiss detective team with the assistance of an African-American art director, an Anglo-Saxon clerk of Welsh descent, a conscientious illegal Colombian garage attendant, a retired Scottish cop, and a Vietnamese chef who considered the whole place Disneyland.

Multicultural diversity intrigued him. He leered, won-

dering if MBA's knew a leer when they saw one, since they weren't preceded by dollar signs.

A shadow, as dense and ominous as that of an approaching Arctic blizzard, fell across the table. The candle flames died, water and wine froze solid, and frost formed on the silverware and porcelain. Ganz blinked rime from his lashes and thought—*the environmentalists were right! Global disaster! The ozone layer has suddenly disappeared!*

It turned out to be worse . . . the Irish beauty, dragged into Le Monde by her distant cousin Sean, scion of a branch of the family founded when a redhaired ancestor opted to settle in France with the made-moiselle of his choice. A very tall gourmand with weight to match, hair as Titian as the beauty's own, and an accent that would put Jean Gabin to shame, he'd arrived unexpectedly for a lengthy visit and insisted on comparing American/French with French/French cuisine.

The ensuing mixture of Irish temper, French chivalry, Oriental fury, and Swiss cowardice exploded into a multicultural scene that resulted in Claude's banning all four from Le Monde for life.

Naturally, Ganz told Arroyo, his devious multicultural plans for the glamorous Oriental MBA had been delayed indefinitely and perhaps forever, but tragedy turned to triumph.

The Haitian waiter—a large tip he would have earned now gone and hoping to recoup with some sort of reward because he'd heard the word detective shouted—casually mentioned, as he escorted Ganz from the premises, that those two

women he'd seen on the TV news? Would anyone be interested in knowing they once had lunch together here?

Thereby providing the final multicultural link to exposing Heidi's and Anastasia's best laid and secret bilateral plan to profit mutually from the demise of Marvin/Martin/Max—an overly romantic gentleman the tabloids, with typical sensitivity and good taste, had dubbed The Marrying Greek.

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*(continued from page 4)*

tensively to such places as Kenya, Turkey, the Canary Islands and Crete; Ms. Burke was Scientist in Residence “for the American schools in England for two years” and “... served briefly in a similar capacity at the American school at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.” She has written more than half a dozen other short stories.

Bill Bodell, author of “The Promotion,” is a literary consultant and a teacher of advanced creative writing in Arizona. He has been the subject of many newspaper profiles and radio interviews, spent more than thirty years as a life insurance agent “where middle income Americans felt they could trust me with secrets and

thoughts they dared not discuss with spouses or doctors,” and has written several novels and numerous articles and short stories.

Finally, M. Clark Law, our New Englander, has recently taken up writing after retirement from the real estate business and time spent in Vienna, Washington, D.C., and California, among other places. “To a New Englander, born and bred, months on end of undiluted sunshine become tedious. Bought land here and built my ‘dream house’ acting as my own designer, contractor, carpenter’s helper, and chief tile layer. Then settled down to serious writing. No more procrastinating.” The result: “The Keyboard Strikes Back” in this issue.

FICTION

# Virus

by Caitlin Burke

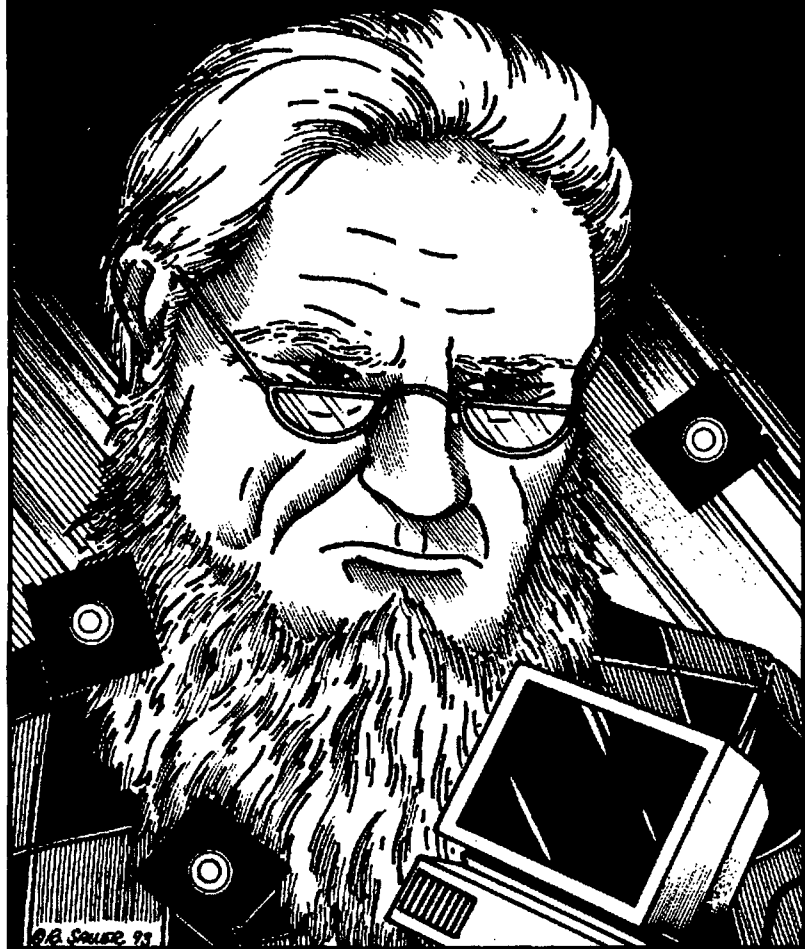


Illustration by Richard Sauer

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**B**rian McCloskey shifted his weight from side to side and clasped his hands behind him. He hadn't felt this scared since his fifth grade teacher had sent him to the principal for tackling Celia Eberhardt on the playground—and he'd only done it because he liked her.

Seated before his computer, his eyes reflecting the surrealist pattern of multicolored ellipses that danced on the monitor, Dr. Robert Nolan looked a great deal more threatening than Brian's elementary school principal ever had.

Things were even worse this time, Brian decided. The stakes were higher. The blister on Brian's foot, rubbed there by the hole in his sock, reminded him of his three-figure bank balance—all of them zeros.

Brian could feel his train jerking into Last Chanceville. It was get this job or lose it all: his apartment, his skis, and—most of all—Amy Dirk.

Nolan turned away sharply from the terminal, peering over his gold-rimmed half-glasses with an imperious scowl. "Yes, what do you want?"

"Amy Dirk is sort of... well... like my girlfriend, I guess. At least I hope..."

"Are the vicissitudes of your romantic liaisons supposed to mean something to me?" Nolan

barked. He was a big man, rugged and outdoorsy with his full, graying beard and his wool plaid shirt. Nolan was rumored to be as prodigious a mountain climber as mathematician, and his appearance confirmed his reputation.

"Well, it's only that Amy said you'd agreed to see me."

"What for?"

"About the computer virus. The one that infected your system and ruined all your data."

"It was what they call a Lehigh virus. Destroyed part of my hard disk. Made most of my data inaccessible. Just look at this mess here," Nolan said, pointing to the whirling dervish of rainbow-colored ellipses weaving frantically across his monitor. "It will take me at least two years to rebuild my work."

Nolan shook his head and cast an unfocused gaze out the window. A thin fall of new snow had dusted the red tile rooftops of Boulder's University of Colorado campus with a sprinkling of white diamonds that glistened in the afternoon sun. Nolan was silent. The room grew warm.

"I'm a private investigator," Brian stammered, breaking the silence and drawing Nolan's attention back to where Brian still stood, awkwardly balancing on his unblistered foot.

"You?" The arch of Nolan's bushy brows betrayed his incredulity.

"Amy said she told you. She said you might hire me."

A dim light of recollection flickered in Nolan's eyes. "Yes, yes, of course, Mr. . . . ?"

"McCloskey. Brian McCloskey."

Nolan waved in the direction of a straight-back wooden chair positioned squarely before the desk. Brian gratefully accepted its support. Nolan said, "I suppose I did mention something to Miss Dirk about needing an investigator. Tell me, how much do you know about chaos theory?"

Brian felt heat rising up from his collar into his cheeks. "Actually, sir, not a lot. Amy was talking last night about the Moore model, but I didn't catch it all. Just that it has something to do with uncertainty." Uncertainty was a concept Brian understood, although not in the mathematical sense. He had felt it when he flunked out of college, felt it when he'd been fired from his job at the travel agency, felt it again when his fledgling ski rental equipment business—financed by his father—had failed. Getting his P.I. license was his last hope, and even that was dicey, if he didn't earn the rent money fast.

Nolan sliced Brian's reverie with his next question. "So how much do you know about computer viruses?"

Brian knew the color of his face now matched the carrot orange of his hair. "I took a computer literacy class in high school."

"Any college?"

"I nearly finished my sophomore year."

"Major?"

"Phys. ed."

"Work experience?"

"Leisure industries, I guess you'd say?"

"Hardly relevant to private investigation. Are you licensed?"

"I'm working on it. Amy thinks I can be successful as a P.I. She says I have a good intuition about people, their motives . . ."

"Mr. McCloskey . . ."

"Please call me Brian."

"Brian, the Seacrest Foundation provides my funding. It is they who are adamant that I hire a private investigator. I see no reason for an investigation, as I have few doubts about who must have destroyed my work. But they insist, and I have no choice except to comply." Nolan leaned forward, his nose inches from Brian's. The professor smelled of spruce trees and wet wool. He cleared his throat before he continued.



"Don't you imagine that the Seacrest Foundation will expect me to deliver a private investigation of far greater reputation and experience than you can boast?"

Brian squared his shoulders and went for broke. Without money to pay the rent, it was back to clerking in Dad's feed store in Iowa. Iowa meant no mountains. No mountains meant no skiing. And no Amy. "It's true, sir, that I'm young and inexperienced, but it's also true that I'll work twice as hard for half the money. Is the foundation picking up the tab, or are you expected to foot this bill out of your own pocket?"

It was Nolan's turn to blush.

Brian pressed on. "Besides, I have some influence with Amy Dirk." Brian tried to puff out his scrawny chest. "You know as well as I do she's the best young talent for mathematics you've found in years. If you want her to stick around as your grad student, it probably wouldn't hurt to give me a break."

Brian shocked himself not so much with his newfound audacity as with the extent of his dishonesty. The last thing he wanted was for Amy to stay at the university for another three or four years. Brian was hoping for wedding bells and a hand-in-hand move closer to

the powder snows of Aspen and Vail shortly after Amy's graduation in June. Amy was an old fashioned girl who wanted a gold band and a husband with a secure job. The only thing that meant more to Brian than skiing was Amy.

Nolan eyed Brian appraisingly, a sardonic smile playing across his thin lips. "Very well, I think I can convince the foundation to give a rising young investigative talent a chance. Besides, the case shouldn't be too difficult. The cad who infected my system has to be one of three I can name for you right now."

Nolan described three suspects, while Brian took copious notes on the back of a bounced check notice he found in the pocket of his ski jacket. The first was Helen Rankin, a professor of anthropology at the university with whom Nolan had conducted what he called an "ill-advised dalliance" a few years back. He claimed that Rankin had left him in bitterness after Seacrest had funded his work but not hers. He believed she'd do anything to extract a single dram of sweet revenge. One of the departmental secretaries had mentioned seeing Rankin around the math department the week before. There was no reason for

her to be there that Nolan knew of, and Rankin had given the department a wide berth ever since her breakup with Nolan.

The second suspect was Martin Shellborn, a colleague of Nolan's in the math department and bitterly jealous of Nolan's superior academic attainments and status. "He knows more about computer viruses than anybody around here, and he'd do anything to discredit my work and get the Seacrest Foundation grant away from me," Nolan said.

The third likely culprit was Jason Trent, a former graduate student who had failed to obtain his Ph.D. Nolan had found his dissertation seriously lacking and had blackballed him at his oral exams. "I checked with the departmental secretary. Trent hasn't turned in his keys, so he could walk in here any time. He was buddy-buddy with Shellborn when he was here, so he's got all day to dream up new viruses." After failing his orals, Trent had taken a job with IBM at its headquarters north of Boulder.

Brian found Helen Rankin in the periodicals room at Norlin Library. The desk clerk pointed her out: "She's the tall, thin woman at the carrel, reading *True Confessions*."

She looked up from her magazine with a warm smile. Her eyes, hardly lined for her forty-plus years, gleamed a nutty yellow-brown. Her hair was shoulder length, blonde, and curly. She looked tan and relaxed in her beige cashmere sweater dress and Navajo turquoise necklace. She curled her long legs beneath her and shifted her chair to face Brian's. "How can I help you?" she whispered, her tone low and melodic. She was not what Nolan had led Brian to expect.

Brian got straight to the point. "A virus was introduced into the computer system used by Dr. Robert Nolan of the math department. You know him, I believe?" Brian thought he sounded impressively official. Amy had lent him a small vinyl notepad cover and a gold-plated pen for taking notes.

"To know him is to hate him," Helen Rankin said. "We were an item for nearly a year, or so the campus gossips prattled. Actually, I loathed the man within weeks after I got to know him. Too self-absorbed, that Nolan. In the game for himself and no one else."

"The game?"

"Grantsmanship. The only reason he kept me around was as window-dressing to help him woo the Seacrest Foundation. The only reason I stayed

around was that I was hoping for some support from them myself. I failed, but Nolan succeeded, and once he got his grant, he no longer needed me. Dumped me within a week. My only regret is that I didn't get around to dumping him first."

"But didn't the breakup make you feel the need for revenge?"

Rankin's laugh was loud enough to cause readers nearby to look up from their books and journals. "You've got to be kidding! To have enjoyed revenge on Nolan, I would have had to care about Nolan, wouldn't I? No, I just wished I'd dumped him sooner so I could have met Argos sooner." Rankin nodded toward a tall, dark-skinned gentleman seated at one of the library desks thumbing through *Shooter's Bible*. His Nehru jacket stretched over heavy muscles, and glistening black curls peeked from beneath his white turban.

Brian made no attempt to hide his confusion. "What does he have to do with this?"

"Why, darling, don't you see? Every minute I spent with Nolan was a minute I missed with Argos. After Nolan dropped me, I enrolled in a transcendental meditation class. Argos is my teacher. And, wow, what a teacher he is!"

Brian studied Helen Rankin intently. She was the sort of middle-aged woman who could say "wow" and get away with it.

"But you still have reason to visit the math department. You were seen there last week."

Helen Rankin looked puzzled. "Math department? Oh, sure, I remember. I'm the on-campus coordinator for the United Way campaign. We had a volunteers' strategy session in the math department's conference room. When was that? Must have been Tuesday a week ago. You can check if you like." Rankin leaned forward, flashing perfect white teeth in Brian's direction.

Brian gulped.

"One last question."

"Shoot."

"What do you know about computer viruses?"

"Not a tinker's damn, but I know enough to hope they leave us alone. Our department just got a whole new shipment of computers, and I'd hate to see all the secretaries and grad students come down with some kind of plague. I'm not worried though. I never touch the bloody beasts. I'd be scared to turn one on."

Brian tracked Martin Shellborn to The Sink, a popular watering hole on Broadway Hill

across from the University of Colorado campus. Shellborn—tall, well-built, and dressed entirely by Brooks Brothers except for his Gucci loafers—was buying pitchers of beer and baskets of Buffalo wings for a contingent of faculty and students numbering at least thirty.

“Join the party,” Shellborn said with a lascivious grin for the waitress and a slap on the back for Brian. “There’s plenty more where this came from,” he said, drawing a thick wad of twenty-dollar bills from his monogrammed money clip.

“I need to ask you some questions,” Brian shouted above the din of happy-hour drinkers crowding The Sink’s tables, booths, and postage stamp dancefloor.

“Ask all you like,” Shellborn answered, steering Brian toward an island of relative calm at a dimly-lit corner table. Shellborn waved at his admirers as he moved, like a politician working a crowd for votes.

“Why the party?” Brian asked as he took a tentative sip of Coors. Brian wasn’t much of a drinker.

Shellborn emptied half his glass in a single gulp. “Got the grant! The biggest money yet. National Science Foundation. Just came through. Should keep me and six graduate stu-

dents in research through the end of the decade and the university swimming in overhead money well into the next century.”

“What’s your grant for?”

“Chaos theory, of course. That’s what we’re all working on. Hottest topic in theoretical mathematics today, although what the use is in knowing that nothing can be known is beyond me. But makes no difference to me. Won the grant, fair and square. Of course, going out to Washington to wine and dine all the program officers at the N.S.F. couldn’t have hurt, don’t you imagine?” Shellborn punched Brian’s arm and grinned broadly.

“You were in Washington last week?”

“Yep. Whole week. Nobel laureate buddy of mine put me up at the Cosmos Club. Why? Is it important?”

“The virus that destroyed Dr. Nolan’s data detonated in his system last Friday. He’s pretty sure that the infection couldn’t have taken place more than a day or two before that. He runs a virus checker every Monday.”

“You think I had something to do with Nolan’s virus.”

“Did you have reason to?”

Shellborn laughed so hard he shook the tiny table and spilled beer onto his gray serge trousers. “I don’t know who you are,

young man, but you're on the wrong trail. Why would I want to mess with Nolan's work? He's miles behind me, off on a dead-end track research-wise, and struggling along on a minuscule grant from the Seacrest Foundation that carries so little overhead the university doesn't even want to do the bookkeeping. Oh sure, Nolan has his reputation, but he's riding on past glories now. Don't expect that Nobel committee to be pronouncing Nolan's name. It will be Shellborn in five years, I promise you that. By the way, what's *your* major?"

IBM's Rocky Mountain headquarters sprawls across a series of prairie knolls north of Boulder on the road to Estes Park. Jason Trent uncurled his six feet plus from behind his desk and moved to the door to greet Brian warmly.

"So happy to meet you at last," Trent said, blue eyes dancing. "Amy Dirk shared a lot about you when we used to hang around the student lounge together."

Brian repressed a pang of jealousy. Just how much more had this pearly-toothed blond Adonis brimming with confidence shared with Amy in that student lounge?

"The gold plaque on your door says you're Director of Software Development. Isn't that an awfully big job for working here only six months?" Brian asked as he took a wooden chair before Trent's desk and Trent slid into the leather executive chair behind.

"Full time for eight, actually, but it's not important. No, it's the perfect job for me, and the company recognizes talent when they see it." Trent could blow his own horn without sounding boastful, a trick Brian felt sure he'd never master. If he ever did something worthy of hornblowing.

"But what about your degree?"

"Haven't gone back to try again and don't imagine I will. Just between you and me," Jason Trent leaned across his desk and dropped his voice to a conspiratorial whisper, "this is the best deal going. IBM wanted a background in theoretical mathematics to head their software development branch here, but they didn't really care about the academic degree. It was performance that counted, and they were mightily impressed with some development work I'd done for them while working part time to earn my tuition. When this position opened up, they offered me the job, and I didn't think

twice about accepting. As luck would have it, I signed on with the company the day before I took my orals. I was on cloud nine that day—didn't care whether I passed or not. I'm lucky I failed, if the truth be known. They're paying me twice what I'd make in an academic position someplace. I have a secretary, an expense account, an unlimited travel budget, and use of the company's gym, swimming pool, and tennis courts. In academia, I'd spend thirty years hoping just to make full professor, and that would depend on courting a bunch of stuffy, worn-out old mathematicians ahead of me. Here, I can expect to move into the upper echelons of corporate management in five years, ten at the most. And there's no pressure to publish or perish."

Brian felt his heart sink. Trent was his final suspect. "You mean you aren't bitter toward Nolan for failing you on your oral exams?"

"Bitter? My God, the man did me a favor!"

Brian McCloskey wrapped his despair around him like a ski parka as he slumped on the sofa in the modest off-campus apartment that Amy Dirk shared with three other girls. He plucked a clear plastic paperweight from the coffee table

and tossed it from hand to hand, watching blizzards consume the miniature Alpine village inside. Brian could almost feel the cold of the snow and the weight of the drifts on the tiny people of the town.

Apparently ignorant of his mood, Amy Dirk's serious gray eyes glowed with enthusiasm. Not a hint of doubt showed in the sprinkling of freckles that dotted her nose or in the determined set of her wide, pretty mouth. "Brian, you can't let this get you down. You're close to solving this case. Then Dr. Nolan will pay you and tell everyone what a good investigator you are and you'll get your license before June and then you'll have work that pays and then . . ." Amy paused, her slender fingers darting before Brian's face as she worked to pull words from the air.

"And then we can get married?" Brian asked, hoping against hope.

"And then I'll take you to Des Moines to meet my folks and we'll see what happens."

Brian sighed. "Amy, it's no use. There were only three suspects in this case, and none of them checks out. Helen Rankin says she couldn't operate a computer if she tried, and I believe her. Besides, she's too tied up with her new love to care about the old. Shellborn is roll-

ing in funding and couldn't care less about Nolan's grant. Besides, he was in Washington when the infection took place. As for Jason Trent, he thinks Nolan did him a favor by flunking him, and from what I can see, he's right."

"So, if they didn't do it, someone else did. You'll figure it out, I know you will. You've got a keen sixth sense about people and their motives," Amy said with a perky tilt of her head.

"Right," Brian said, feeling his coat of despair lighten a little as he recalled something about the dancing ellipses on Nolan's computer monitor. "Explain chaos theory to me again, will you, Amy? But first let me use your phone."

Brian arrived at the offices of the Seacrest Foundation just after four o'clock. Yesterday's light spatter of snow was working itself into a full-blown, upslope storm likely to last several days and dump two or three feet of heavy, wet snow on the city. Such snows invariably ripped branches from the deciduous trees planted by those immigrants from the East who wanted Boulder to look like Baltimore. Brian smiled as he heard a limb crack behind him. Nature was winning.

"I'm glad Dr. Nolan has brought an investigator into the case," Myra Portridge, executive director of the Seacrest Foundation, said as she shook Brian's hand. She was a stunningly elegant woman—probably in her fifties—who looked forty, acted thirty, and spoke with the lilting voice of a trained opera singer. If it weren't for Amy, Brian thought, I might fall in love here and now.

"I won't hold anything back from you," she said. "I'm glad you called, though I don't see what our relationship with Nolan has to do with the virus that infected his data."

"I can't be sure that it does until I get all the facts," said Brian, extracting his covered notepad and gold pen from the leather briefcase Amy had just bought him.

"If you are to conduct a thorough investigation, you should know that all was not well between Dr. Nolan and the foundation. When we first met him, he seemed not only a brilliant researcher but a charming man. Kept company with a wonderful professor . . . what was her name? Eileen or Ellen, something like that?"

"Helen Rankin?"

"Yes, she's the one. They seemed such an admirable pair, just the sort who'd bring credit



to the foundation. We didn't have enough money to assist them both, so we decided to support Dr. Nolan's research. There were rumors, then—three years ago—that he might just be ready for the breakthrough that would bring him the Nobel prize. That would certainly have been a feather in the foundation's cap."

"But it didn't work out that way?"

"No, Dr. Nolan split up with Rankin—can't imagine why, charming woman—and seemed to just close in on himself. We got fewer and fewer progress reports from him. He declined dinner invitations with our trustees, even asked to be omitted from the list of grantees in our annual report. He said he needed time to concentrate—no distractions, please. He acted as if his grant were a right rather than a privilege. He was furious when I suggested his grant might be withdrawn at the next board meeting. You see, Dr. Nolan hasn't published anything in three years, and some of our board members are beginning to think our modest research support would be placed better somewhere else. With Martin Shellborn, perhaps."

"I see."

"I'm not telling you anything Dr. Nolan doesn't already

know. In fact, we discussed the situation in great detail just week before last. Of course, that was before the disaster of the computer virus infection. As things stand now, I expect our board will give Robert a chance to recover from his setback before reviewing his funding status. A lot will depend on the outcome of your investigation," she said.

Gone was Nolan's facade of arrogance. Gone was his imperious scowl. Brian felt more like the principal than the student compared with their first meeting. It was a good feeling.

Nolan sat at his desk, surrounded by stacks of books that threatened to tumble down upon him along with his reputation. He clenched and unclenched his hands. His shaggy gray beard needed trimming; his hair was tangled.

"How did you find out?" Nolan asked.

"Just simple deduction, actually. If Rankin, Shellborn, and Trent didn't infect your system, then you must have. Chapter Three of the Acme Home Study P.I. manual: when all the possibilities have been eliminated, it's the impossible that must be true."

"And you thought it impossible that I would infect my own system?"

"The trustees of the Seacrest Foundation probably would have."

Nolan hung his leonine head. "I thought it would buy me time. I've been going nowhere with my work. Three years and nothing to show for it. The Seacrest Foundation was hinting at canceling my grant, and Shellborn was tooting his own horn—going after big dollars from the feds based on my work. My work, I tell you." The professor's face reddened.

"And you hired me not in spite of my inexperience, but because of it. You thought I'd fail, but you could show that you'd tried, and the whole thing would blow over with the Seacrest Foundation."

"If you report the truth, I'm finished."

"There may be another way," Brian said.

A light of hope flashed in Nolan's eyes. "I'll pay you double, triple your fee, anything you want if you'll just tell the foundation you can't find out who planted the virus. Maybe it was a computer repair technician or a graduate student playing pirated games on my system late at night."

"That's not my style," Brian said and knew that it was true. Poverty has its pride.

"You'll tell then?" Nolan said, crestfallen.

"Not necessarily. I've been thinking about that series of dancing ellipses I saw on your computer monitor the first day I met you."

"Oh, that? It's just an aberration. Some interacting algorithms I entered just before the virus infection. Some got destroyed. Others remained intact. There's no rhyme or reason to what happens. The pattern changes totally at random. There's no predicting it."

"That's exactly what I thought you'd say."

"It's important?"

"You bet it is. Amy told me about the Moore model. Goes beyond chaos theory."

"Yes, of course, I know the work. Chaos has to do with initial uncertainties. We can't predict the outcome."

"And your ellipses?"

Nolan leapt from his chair and charged toward the window, upsetting stacks of papers and journals as he swished past. "I see what you're getting at. My algorithms specify the beginning conditions precisely, but the outcomes are inherently unpredictable. I've verified the Moore model!"

"How about sharing *that* with the Seacrest Foundation?" Brian asked. "My guess is they'll forget all about who put the virus in the system."

"It's even better than that." The big man's eyes glazed over. "It's a whole new area of research. Forget chaos theory. I'll leave it to Shellborn. I can go beyond chaos theory. I'll make my mark as the one who showed how unpredictable unpredictability can be!"

Amy Dirk nestled her head into the curve of Brian's shoulder. He leaned back against her overstuffed sofa, savoring the warmth of her, the closeness of her, the scent of the Aliage she always wore. He patted the receipt for three months' rent, paid in advance, that rested in his shirt pocket. From Nolan's fee and bonus for "consultation services," Brian had enough left over for an engagement ring for Amy and several lift tickets. Today, Copper Mountain, tomorrow, Vail, Brian thought as his prospects seemed to be brightening.

Amy's words snapped Brian from his fantasies. She was talking graduate school again.

"Amy, I thought I was going to meet your parents in June. Then maybe we could plan ... " Brian hesitated, his face matching his carrot-colored hair again, but for a different reason.

"A wedding?" Amy finished his sentence for him.

"Will you, Amy? Will you be my wife?" Brian resisted the urge to drop on one knee.

"Well, you *are* a successful private investigator now. Unlicensed, of course, but I'm sure you'll get that soon."

Brian's thoughts flitted to his hardly touched pile of course materials from the Acme Correspondence School of Private Investigation. What are the laws for getting a P.I. license in Colorado, anyway? he thought.

Amy said, "Still, I have been thinking maybe we could go see my parents over spring break instead of waiting until after graduation. What do you think?"

# Exterminators Extraordinaire

by Beth R. Kiteley



The country club grounds-keeper found the van when he arrived for work early Wednesday morning. He first saw only tracks across his immaculate turf, and with an angry exclamation, followed them to assess the damage. The trail led over the hill to a sand trap near the fourth hole. The view was worth at least a glance, but the greensman saw only a white van heeled over awkwardly, its left front tire half buried in the sand. The van bore a stenciled sign: EXTERMINATORS EXTRAORDINAIRE. The driver's door hung open; the seats were empty.

The keeper glanced inside. The floor was a jumble of equipment, paper, coveralls, and masks. There were no keys in the ignition.

Back at the clubhouse, the greensman called a tow truck and the police. The first four-somes put in an appearance, paused briefly to ponder the police presence, then set off on their rounds. They didn't get far. Just off the second hole they encountered the golf pro, Buster Welltin. Buster (Bruce to his mother and Brucie to his fiancée, Mayor Swinn's daughter Angie) lay peacefully on the groomed turf, a golf club at his side, his eyes closed to the lovely morning. His pillow was a rusty brown, irregular shape.

"It's blood!" said one golfer, and another promptly turned white and relieved himself of his breakfast.

The third, a retired doctor, touched Welltin's cold throat. "He's dead; go see if the police are still here."

A town the size of Hamermill doesn't have many murders. Still, the town's cops flatter themselves they handle crime as well as anyone. Late Wednesday afternoon the chief gathered his best officers and filled them in on what he knew so far.

"Okay, here's the deal. We got a dead man—Buster Welltin, golf pro at the country club. He was hit over the head with a golf club—maybe his own—on hole number two. Sometime between seven o'clock, when the last golfers saw him at the club, and about two A.M., the coroner says.

"Buster (or Bruce) is—was about thirty, goodlooking, and engaged to Angie Swinn, the mayor's daughter and, as you know, the apple of his eye. Welltin had been in town about a year, and no doubt did some playing around with other girls, but we don't know yet who or when or where. I've interviewed the Swinns, and Angie said he canceled a date with her, said he had work at the

club after hours. Neither the club employees nor the management knows anything about late work.

"His wallet was not taken. His left wrist has a light strip of skin, but no watch was found on or near the dead man, and he did have a watch at his apartment. So maybe the murderer took one he was wearing, or someone took it after he was killed, or maybe he just didn't wear one Tuesday."

"Maybe the murderer took the watch but was scared away before he found the wallet," suggested Joe.

"Maybe," agreed the chief. He shuffled his notes. "Now in the second place, or maybe the first, since we were called about it before the murder was discovered, a van was found on the golf course, stuck in a sand trap near hole number four. Hole four is not far from hole two, where Buster was found."

"From the puddle of blood under his head, we know he was killed where he was found. Also the coroner says the blood had pooled in his body just the way he was lying. So he wasn't killed somewhere else and brought there in the van—or another vehicle. No sign he was ever in the van, dead or alive."

"Buster's car was in the employees' lot. The club itself was open Tuesday evening, and had

a few diners but no parties scheduled, and it all closed up about ten thirty. No one noticed the car; it was too familiar to attract attention.

"The greens keeper doesn't remember seeing it when he drove in this morning, but that's not surprising. He saw the van's tracks and was so upset by them he didn't notice much else."

"Back to the van—it belongs to Ben Homer, a guy who has a pest extermination business. He claims it was stolen last night, though he didn't report it. He's being cagey about where and when it disappeared—says he thought it was joyriders and he could find it. His wife says she knows he didn't take it to the country club."

"She knows he didn't if she's the one who did. Why would she? Does she have any connection with Buster? She might be the girlfriend. She's older than Buster, but so what?"

"Now, Ben we do know a little about, though he hasn't ever been in trouble. But he's a gambler. Officer Hardy sat in on a neighborhood game with him once and says Ben went through his stake pretty quickly. His wife—Maxine—came after him and was mad as hell, but because he was

playing or because he lost Hardy wasn't sure.

"There's nothing yet to tie the Homers to the murder except the van being found nearby. And I repeat—the van is clean. No blood, no hairs except from the Homers, no chemicals present in it except traces of the stuff Homer uses in the business. But there's something fishy about its being there, and I want to know more."

"Any other clues?" Abe asked.

"A couple. The golf club. No bag found, just the one club. It did the deed all right. The head fits the dent in Welltin's temple. The grip has been wiped, but on the shaft we found one readable print. It doesn't match Welltin's. We're comparing it to the Homers'.

"Halfway between Country Club Drive and where the body was found was a scrap of red material. Could have been there awhile, but the greens keeper says that area was mowed Monday, so probably the scrap came later. Otherwise it would have been chewed up by the mower."

"Down on the street is a fresh pool of oil where someone parked for awhile. In that block, the houses are all on one side of the street and face the golf course. The oil was across

the street, next to the greens. Doesn't prove a thing—everyone along there has several cars and lots of teenagers with friends. Anyone could have parked there, and no one would have noticed. And they didn't. We've asked all up and down the block, and no results.

"Who do I suspect? The Homers because of the van, though the motive isn't clear. Angie Swinn, if she caught Buster meeting someone else. Or her father, for the same reason. Yeah, I know it's blasphemy to suspect the mayor, but you asked. Most, I suspect some other woman. I don't know who she is, but I think she parked on the street across from those houses, walked up and met Brucie Baby on hole number two, and beat his brains in because he was marrying Angie and not her. Maybe he struggled with her, and her dress got torn and a piece fell off on the way back."

"Why the club?" asked Hertha. "Was he taking practice shots in the dark?"

Joe laughed. "Maybe he had it along for protection, or the murderer took it to kill him with."

Everyone hashed the information around awhile; then the chief gave out assignments. "Joe, take Ben Homer. See if you can dig up something else



on him. Abe, find out what dirt Brucie Baby had in his back yard. He must have been popular, and he only paired up with Angie Swinn a few months ago. Hertha, tackle the woman angle. Was Maxine Homer playing around? I'll talk to the Swinns again. We'll get together again tomorrow."

Thursday afternoon Joe reported, "I asked around, and found the pub where Ben hangs out. They say he's sure had something on his mind. As far as his gambling, they think he's been resisting lately. The bartender gave me a name—Herbie Wertz.

"Wertz stalled at first—didn't want to rat on a friend. He finally admitted hosting a poker game the night Welltin was killed. Ben Homer played all evening, till he lost his stake, which was about fifty dollars. He hung around a little, then said goodnight and left, pretty gloomy. He came running right back in and said his van was stolen. The game broke up, and four guys piled into Herbie's car and rode around an hour or more, looking for the van, but no dice. They dropped Ben off at his house about two A.M. They didn't see him go inside, just left him at the curb.

"Wertz thought maybe Mrs. Homer took the van—she re-

ally hates the gambling. And he thought maybe Ben thought so, too, but neither one said it. The van wasn't at Homer's house when they checked first, nor when they took him home."

Hertha's report followed Joe's. "According to the neighbors, Maxine Homer doesn't play around. Period. She takes care of the kids, keeps a pretty neat house, and works at the Ex-Ex shop three days a week. She also does volunteer aide work at the kids' school. She attends St. Barnaby church. Father Murrey says she's honest and devout, and angry about Ben's gambling. He's counseled them several times and thought Ben was on the right track now.

"The Homers have lived here about five years. They are buying their house. They don't have relatives here, and Maxine doesn't seem to have any real close friends. The neighbors like them both, and say the twins are good kids but kinda spoiled. Always into minor trouble but not delinquents. Dennis the Menace types, maybe.

"Even if Maxine was the kind to cheat, and no one thinks so, I don't know when she would have the time. They are nearly always at home together in the evening. If one goes out, they go together."

Joe objected, "But he did go to Herbie's poker game."

"The first one in a long time. I'm talking about the last six months, and I don't see any time for Maxine to be seeing Bruce Welltin."

"What did you come up with, Abe?" the chief asked.

"Bruce Baby's been in town about a year and a half. He's dated a lot of girls, a few from the country club set but mostly lower echelons."

"Showoff!" scoffed Hertha.

"Bruce?"

"No, you with your big vocabulary!"

Abe grinned. "He seems to have finally settled on one more or less steady—a girl named Jena Meggs, a cocktail waitress at the Imperial Bar. He'd drop in about half an hour before closing, and they'd leave together at lockup time, four or five nights a week.

"About a month ago, he suddenly stopped showing up, and Jena went into a big pout. Then when the engagement announcement for Welltin and Angie Swinn came out in the paper, she really came unglued and started talking about getting even.

"Now get this! One of the girls says when Jena was calling Bruce a cockroach, she overheard someone tell Jena to call an exterminator. A joke,

see, but maybe Jena took it seriously."

"An exterminator? Ben Homer—Exterminators Extraordinaire! She'd have to be a moron, Abe."

"She ain't too bright, I can tell from what they say about her. But she's out of town; I can't find her. Hasn't showed for work, and no answer at her apartment."

"Who was it suggested the exterminator?" the chief said.

Abe shook his head. "The girl didn't remember. Oh, yeah, she also said Jena recently sold her nearly new car, and is driving an old heap that leaks oil. Jena's always griping about it, and so is the hotel manager, since it leaves pools wherever she parks it. It ain't at her apartment house now, though."

The chief reported, "I interviewed Mayor Swinn and daughter Angie. She's very shook up—under doctor's care. The mayor admits he didn't care much for Welltin, but Angie doted on him, so..." Everyone nodded. "The mayor's a widower, as you all know. He was home alone Tuesday evening. Angie had a date with Buster, but he canceled, so she went to a friend's instead. She left about ten o'clock and was in bed by eleven. Her father was already asleep when she got home."

"Did you check with the friend?" Abe asked.

"Yes. She agrees Angie left before eleven, but doesn't know just when. Angie walked home; they only live a couple of blocks apart."

"Either of them on Country Club Drive?" asked Joe.

"No, the next street east. Ironic, huh?"

"Maybe more than ironic, chief." Hertha's tone was thoughtful. "Even from the next street, it wouldn't be far up onto the golf course where the body was found, would it?"

"No, and not far from the oil drip we wondered about. But there's no hard evidence tying the Swinns, or Angie's friend, for that matter, to the murder scene, and both live close enough not to need a car to get to hole two. I will talk to Angie again, though, as soon as she's up to it."

He dealt out new assignments. "Abe, check all the used car lots. Find out where Jena Meggs traded cars, and why. Joe, talk to Homer again. Find out if Jena did in fact hire him. I can't think anyone's that dumb, but you never know. Hertha, talk to the girls Meggs works with. Maybe they'll remember something else."

Abe found the car almost immediately. "Sure," said Smiling Jack. "I sold her the car in the

first place, and I took it back yesterday. She wanted the nice little Nissan she traded me, but it was already sold. I found her a real bargain . . ."

"Describe it," interrupted Abe. "Color, make, and model. And I need to look at the car she brought in."

The car, luckily, hadn't been cleaned out. It was a mess of lipsticked tissues, wadded up gum wrappers, and, if we're lucky, thought Abe, fingerprints. And it definitely did drip oil. Smiling Jack wasn't happy about scene-of-the-crime tape draped around one of his cars, but Abe assured him it would only be till the lab crew could look it over.

Joe brought Ben Homer to the station. Ben sat miserably in an interrogation room, hands clasped between his knees. "C'mon," said Joe, "tell the chief what you told me."

Homer said, "It all started with a package. No," he corrected, "it started with a phone call on Monday last week."

Ben had been figuring taxes when the phone rang. Distracted by numbers, he answered absently, "Ex-Ex."

"What?" It was a woman's voice. "I was calling Exterm . . ."

"Oh yeah, sorry. That's us —Exterminators Extraordinaire."

Tax figures still whirling, Ben realized the woman was talking. "Sorry," he said again, "Repeat please?"

There was an impatient sigh on the other end of the line. "I said I have a job for you."

She'd said a lot more than that. "What kind of a job?"

"Plain old exterminator—whatever. How do you do it?"

"Depends on the circumstances. I may need to come look you over."

"No way! I'll send you two thousand, half now and half when it's done."

"T-two thousand? Are you serious?" Ben's pencil dropped from his hand. She must have bugs like he'd never seen.

"Oh, all right. Two now and two later."

"Are we talking cockroach?" Ben gasped.

She laughed bitterly, "You're on the money. Cockroach is right. His name's Buster Well-tin; he's a golf pro. If you want to use one of his clubs, fine! And the sooner the better!"

The receiver clicked in his ear. "Hey, lady!" Ben yelled into the dead instrument. "We ain't—I don't. Geez!"

"So you killed him for her?" the chief asked.

"Oh no. I thought it was a joke." Ben Homer hung his head a moment. "After the money came, I did think about

keeping it. You know I'm a compulsive gambler?" The chief nodded. "I was tempted. But I didn't keep it, and I didn't kill the guy."

"Did your wife?"

Ben Homer's eyes showed white around the edges. "God, no! Maxie wouldn't hurt a fly..."

"Or why you do the exterminating and not her?" Joe smirked.

"When did you get the money?" the chief demanded.

The day after the phone call, at noon, Ben had picked up a sandwich at the deli and parked the van in the country club lot facing the putting green. Two overbaked women were practicing putting, coached by a big blond guy—must have been the pro. My pro? Ben wondered. "My pro? Geez! I'm not going to do this!" he muttered. Even if it did prove to be for real. He didn't need money *that* bad.

Maxie was ready to leave when Ben returned to the shop. "See you at supper," she said, then stuck her head back in the door. "Oh, there's a special delivery marked 'Personal' with the mail. Is it my birthday present?" She grinned and didn't wait for an answer.

The special delivery was a brown envelope, bigger than business size. It had a return

address Ben couldn't read, and "Ben Homer—Exterm. Ex." in round handwriting.

He hefted it. Was it from the caller? Probably wadded-up newspaper and a note saying, "Gotcha!" With a thumping heart, he slit the envelope.

A bundle of money was tucked into a folded newspaper clipping announcing the engagement of Bruce (Buster) Welltin to Angela Swinn, the mayor's daughter. The picture was of the guy Ben had watched at noon. The contract was no joke. Unless—he picked up the bundle and slipped off the rubber band. There were twenty one-hundred dollar bills. Real bills—not Monopoly ones.

"You say you couldn't read the return address?" the chief interrupted. "Then how did you know where to return it?"

"I almost didn't return it," confessed Ben. "I did think about bringing the money to you cops, or going to confession, though I didn't have nothing to confess, except being tempted. Father Murrey would say give the money to the poor—we are the poor!" He shook his head. "But I just couldn't keep it. So I decided to try to find out who the woman was."

Friday he went to the express service.

"I need to know who sent a package several days ago," he began.

"Who was it delivered to?" asked the woman behind the counter.

"Well, me."

"But who are you?" she asked with a smirk.

"Oh. Ben Homer, Ex-Ex—Exterminators Extraordinaire."

"Did the package arrive damaged?"

"No, it was fine."

"Who was the sender?"

"That's what I need to find out. I couldn't read it."

"What were the contents?" she interrupted.

"Uhhhhh..." He couldn't very well say two thousand dollars.

"Well?" She waited, pencil poised.

"I-uh-I haven't opened it yet."

"Then how do you know it isn't damaged?"

"Well, it hadn't been opened before—I mean..."

"When did it arrive?"

Given the date, the woman shuffled through files and finally said severely, "I think you're mistaken. We didn't send you anything. Are you accusing someone here of tampering?"

"Oh no! I just need to know who sent it." Ben backed away from the counter.

"Well, I can't help you," the woman said, putting her pencil down and tearing up the form.

Ben bolted out the door, cursing that idea. But it did bear fruit. Late that afternoon after Maxie had gone home, the delivery guy came in.

"I hear you filed a complaint about a package I delivered."

"Oh no! I tried to tell the woman the package was fine. It was just . . ." Ben had a sudden inspiration. "It was full of manure. I think it was my brother; we're always playing jokes on each other. But I couldn't read the label, and I wouldn't want to blame him if it was somebody else."

"Manure, eh?" The man's eyes crinkled up, and he chuckled. "I remember . . ." and he was off on a long-winded story about jokes played on and by him.

"The woman at your office wasn't any help," Ben ventured as the expressman paused for breath.

"You should have asked me; I coulda told you it didn't go through the office. I did it for Jena over at the Imperial Hotel bar."

"Jena?"

"Yeah. She's a real looker, ain't she? Not much upstairs, though." The man grinned and tapped his head.

"Well, thanks," Ben sighed.

"Your brother hired her, huh?"

"Yeah, must have."

"So you took it back to Jena?" the chief asked.

"Yeah, well, first I wanted to check her out." He squirmed uneasily. "I took Maxie to dinner at the Imperial, and found out Jena's last name, but I didn't get a chance to talk to her. All I did was make Maxie suspicious."

"Of what?"

"That I was playing around, I guess. Anyway, that's how she acted. So on Tuesday I looked up Jena's address in the phone book and took the money back."

"What did she say?"

"She wasn't home. I just stuffed it in her mailbox."

Joe and the chief exchanged looks. Had Homer told them everything? They left him alone awhile to think about it.

"Bring in Mrs. Homer," the chief said. "We'll see what she says. And get a description from Homer and see if you can find a delivery man to match."

After Joe left, Abe called in to report that he had sent a crew to go over Jena's old car for fingerprints or anything else and was returning to the woman's apartment house with a description of the car she had bought.

"Get the manager to let you in if she doesn't answer," the

chief instructed. "Hell, maybe she's dead, too!"

Joe returned with Mrs. Homer, white-faced and shaken. The chief got her some coffee, asked about the kids, and, when she had calmed down a bit, had her husband brought back in. He was given strict orders not to say anything, and the chief asked Mrs. Homer to tell him about Tuesday night.

"It started on Monday afternoon," she gulped.

She had unlocked the shop door and let herself in. It was a struggle, with her arms full of jeans to be patched and a book to read. Things were often slow, but working three afternoons a week saved money over hiring someone. And Ben wasn't good at certain things.

Like keeping the place neat, she thought sourly. She dropped her bundle on a chair and attacked the messy desk. Coffee cup cleared away, sports magazine in the rack on the wall, time books in one stack, scraps of paper—what was this?

It had a scribble on it—\$2000—with the last two zeros trailing off in a squiggle. Some job, if Ben charged two thousand! Maybe it was something else—a gambling debt?

"Oh, no, please," she murmured. Ben had promised, and

so far he'd kept it—hadn't he? The paper was blank on the back. She threw it into the wastebasket, then immediately fished it out again. She'd better ask Ben about it.

The answering machine light indicated a message. She flicked it on, and a woman's voice filled the office.

"Hi, remember me? I'll be on the golf course—hole number two—at ten tomorrow night. You can do it then. Okay?"

Maxie stared in shock at the machine as it whirled to a stop. She sat down heavily in Ben's chair. Who? Do it? Oh no! Not Ben. Please not Ben. She shook her head. Ben wasn't a chaser; she knew he wasn't. Now, if it had been Herbie suggesting a poker game... maybe it was Herbie's wife.

Maxie stared at the machine accusingly. She rewound the tape and listened again. Was it a code? Did "do it" mean poke her—poker? Maybe. She set her jaw and erased the tape. Whatever it meant, he wouldn't get that message.

Tuesday afternoon Maxie went shopping. Anything to keep her mind calm. It didn't help much, and when the twins arrived home from school, they only added to her tension. She sent them off to friends and tried concentrating on a new magazine. When her hands



started hurting, she realized she was clenching them so the nails dug into her palms. She jumped up and started supper.

Five o'clock came and went, the twins tumbling in, claiming starvation. But no Ben. No Ben at six, nor six thirty, when she fed the children. Seven, eight—she insisted on baths and sent Katy and Dave to bed. At nine thirty she stopped pacing the floor and peeked into the children's rooms. They were sound asleep. Maxie grabbed car keys and a sweater and, locking the house door, climbed into her old Honda and headed for Herbie's.

Ben's van was parked in Herbie's driveway. Maxie rested her head on the Honda's steering wheel a moment. She thought about storming in and dragging Ben out. No, too humiliating, for them both. She thought about just going home and going to bed, but knew she'd never sleep.

She thought about waiting till he came out, but she didn't want a big fight in the street any more than in Herbie's house. But if he came out and the van wasn't there, and she wasn't there . . .

It took twenty minutes to drive home, check once more on the sleeping children, run back to Herbie's, start the van, and drive it—drive it where? The

golf course, of course. If the message were a code, Ben would know she knew. And if it weren't—if some woman was waiting for him—well, she could have the van instead! Maxie thrust out her jaw and pressed harder on the accelerator.

When she reached the golf course, she hesitated. Hole number two, the voice had said. Who knew where that was? She gritted her teeth, shifted into gear, and steered the heavy vehicle onto the grass and over the hill.

"Maxie!" Homer burst out.

"And that's all! I got it stuck, so I left it there, and walked home. And you—you still weren't there!" she cried to Ben.

"You went off and left the kids alone?"

"If you care so much about them, why were you playing poker with money I need to buy their food and their shoes? And what money were you playing with anyway?"

"I got paid in cash," he yelled back.

"Hold on," the chief said. "You can fight this out later. I need to know whether you saw anyone on the golf course, Mrs. Homer."

She shook her head. "No, I ran straight home. I didn't see anyone at all."

"Which way did you go?"

"I just followed my tracks back to the clubhouse."

"You didn't go the other way—toward Country Club Drive?"

"No, why would I? We live the opposite direction."

The officers left the Homers alone a few minutes, then turned them loose with a caution not to leave town. The chief okayed the release of the van—the crew still hadn't found anything in it relevant to the murder, and he was inclined to believe the couple's stories, off-the-wall as they seemed.

An uproar in the front brought him out of his office, and he found Abe herding in a tall redheaded girl, hands cuffed behind her, shrill voice turning the air blue. Abe's face was scratched; his tie had been yanked crooked, and he was almost as mad as the girl. But satisfied, too.

"Here's the red dress, and here she is!" he crowed. "Hiding out in her apartment—new car in the garage and," he deepened his voice, "guilty as hell!"

"We'll see," the chief said. "Bring her on back."

When the redhead calmed down and quit cussing, she told Joe, Abe, and the chief her story.

Tuesday evening Jena had been late to work again. When she got out of her rattletrap car and slammed the door, the hem of her red dress caught in the door. She swore and jerked it free and ran in the back door of the Imperial Hotel. The maitre d' saw her hurrying down the hall and looked at his watch.

"I know! I hit all the red lights!" She pushed past him, avoiding his touch.

Her supervisor, the bartender, wasn't so polite. After he chewed her out, he threatened to dock her next time and waved her off to tend to early customers.

After such a rotten start, Jena's evening didn't improve. No high-tippers showed, but more than enough gropers and feelers. The only nice guy was Chuck, the delivery man.

He came on stronger than usual, "but not pushy, ya know?" Jena confided in the restroom as she renewed her lipstick. "He's okay."

"Too bad he's not rich," laughed the other girl, and Jena agreed.

It was nine thirty when Jena suddenly developed a terrible headache. She had just served Chuck again, and squeezed her eyes shut and clutched her head.

"Omigosh! A migraine!" She sagged against the table.

Chuck was all worried, even offering to drive her home, but the girl said, no, she'd be okay. Jena laid her case before the bartender, gathered her things, and, without so much as a glance at Chuck, left the bar.

Once outside the hotel, Jena's hand fell from her head, and she ran to her car. It was an old one; she'd sold the new one for cash last week. Oh well, this one ran okay. She'd soon have a better one; she was good at saving money. She gunned the car out of the parking lot and headed for the country club.

She zipped past the gates and into the residential section adjoining the links. Nobody would notice an extra car parked on the street by the golf course. She shivered and pulled an old jacket from the trunk to cover her bare shoulders. Something was lying under the jacket—a golf club. Must be Buster's.

"I'll take it back to him," she muttered, pulling it out.

The moon was bright enough that she could see where she was going, and it only took a few minutes to reach the second hole. When she got there, a tall figure rose from the grass.

"Jena?" His blond hair shone in the moonlight as he stepped forward. "You're on time . . ." For a change, he meant.

Jena gritted her teeth. "You alone?" She peered over his shoulder.

"Of course. Who would I bring with me?"

"No, I thought . . . I mean, I . . ." she stuttered to a halt.

"Well, what do you want?" asked the man.

Where was the guy anyway? Jena peered around angrily. She'd have to stall Buster awhile. "Just to talk to you, see if you'd change your mind about me."

The man laughed. "Jena, darling, if you were rich . . ."

"Or the mayor's daughter," she interrupted.

"Jena! You know I love you. You're . . . mmmm . . . delectable."

"What?"

"You stupid little bitch, you're so dumb," the man sneered, raising a fist.

Jena screamed something at him. She was mad, but maybe it sounded like she was scared. Someone rushed up the slope toward them, grabbed the golf club from Jena's hand, and swung it against Buster's temple.

Buster fell to the grass, and the other leaned over him, club ready. But Buster didn't move, and the person dropped the club and turned to the girl.

"You're late!" Jena screeched. But when moonlight

fell on the newcomer's face, she stared, mouth dropping open. "Oh!"

They looked at each other, at the crumpled heap between them, and the fallen golf club. "Geez, Lueez! Let me out of here!"

"I just ran like hell and got back in my car and drove away," finished the girl, eyes glittering and face flushed.

The questions poured on her from every side. "Who was it? Who were you expecting? Are you sure you didn't do it?"

"One at a time!" roared the chief. "First, who were you expecting?"

"That ex-exterminator-whatever guy, of course. I paid him to knock off that creep, Buster..." She paused and looked at their intent faces. "He didn't do it," she reassured them. "He returned the money. But I didn't know till I got home and found the package in the mailbox. So I really didn't hire him, see? I didn't do nothing!"

"Then who..."

They were interrupted by Hertha, opening the door to push a shambling, weepy, beery Chuck in ahead of her. "Here's your killer," she exclaimed.

"It's all my fault," sobbed the man. "I did it."

"You followed her Tuesday night. You ran up there and killed Buster when he threatened her, didn't you?"

"What?" The man sobered suddenly. "I didn't kill nobody! I thought the Ex-Ex guy did it. I suggested it, sure, but I didn't think she'd do it. I told her to hire an exterminator. I didn't think she'd take me serious."

"How about the money you delivered to him?"

"It was money? He told me it was manure." The man was enraged. "Hell, I didn't know he was a liar!"

"Go throw him in the drunk tank," the chief said disgustingly. "See what he has to say when he sobers up." He turned back to Jena Meggs.

"All right, Miss Meggs, when you saw the killer was that man..."

"Chuck?" she said. "It wasn't him! It was..."

"Chief!" the door opened and the desk sergeant stuck his head in. "Someone here to see you—very urgent."

The chief rolled his eyes to the ceiling. "Not now!"

"It's the mayor," apologized the sergeant.

"Wait," the chief gritted to his officers. "Not one more word till I get back."

The door slammed, and Hertha, Abe, Joe, and Jena Meggs looked at one another.

Jena shrugged. "Anyone got a cigarette?"

Ten minutes passed before the chief returned, ushering in a middle-aged man and a young woman. He closed the door gently behind him, leaned against it, and nodded to Jena Meggs. "You may finish your statement now, Miss Meggs. And it better be accurate," he warned.

"Why not?" she shrugged. "It wasn't Chuck on the golf course, it was her, Angie Swinn." She pointed at the young woman. "She musta heard me scream. She grabbed up the golf club and smacked Buster with it, and the last I saw, she was yanking that fancy watch off his wrist."

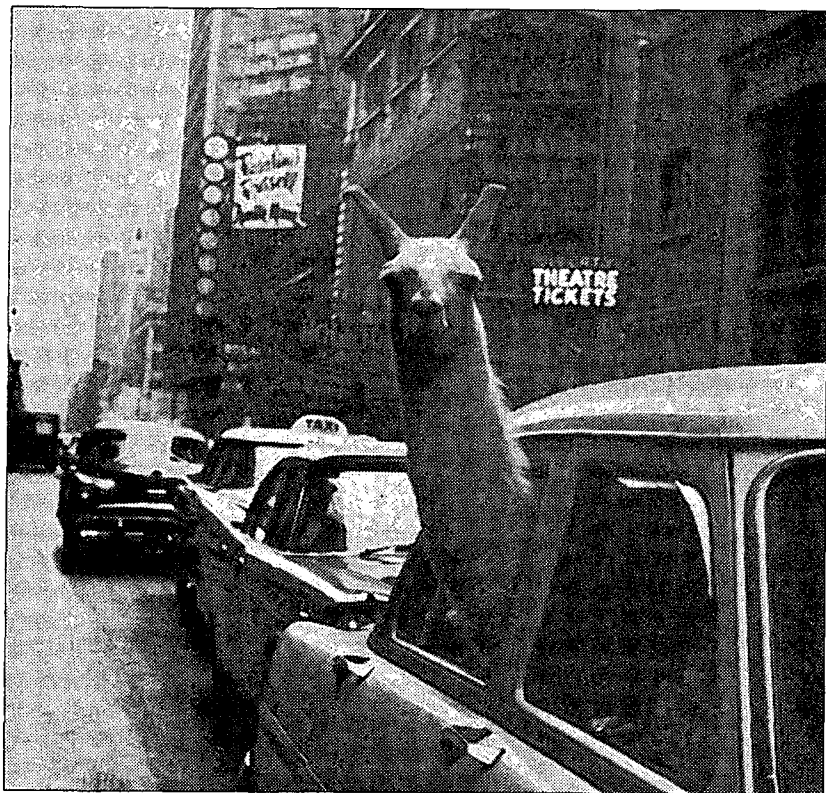
"It was mine; I gave it to him," said Angie Swinn, tossing her long blonde hair out of her eyes. She motioned at Jena. "She passed me as I was walking home, and I was curious. I saw her park and go up on the

golf course, and I saw Buster waiting for her. When I heard her scream, I thought—I don't know what I thought. I just hated him—meeting someone else when he's engaged to me—he's dirt!"

"Well, he is now, anyway," whispered Joe to Hertha.

Hammermill's police officers are thorough, well-trained, and smart enough when a solution falls into their laps to grab it. Mayor Swinn's bringing Angie in to confess to Buster's murder somewhat discredits those who say she was spoiled rotten. Hertha and Joe believe her story. Abe thinks her dad did it and Angie's covering for him. The chief says wait for the trial. Mayor Swinn has hired his daughter the best attorney he could find, and she's pleading temporary insanity. Given who she is, she probably won't go to jail. After all, she's not a bad girl. They all agree on that.

# THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



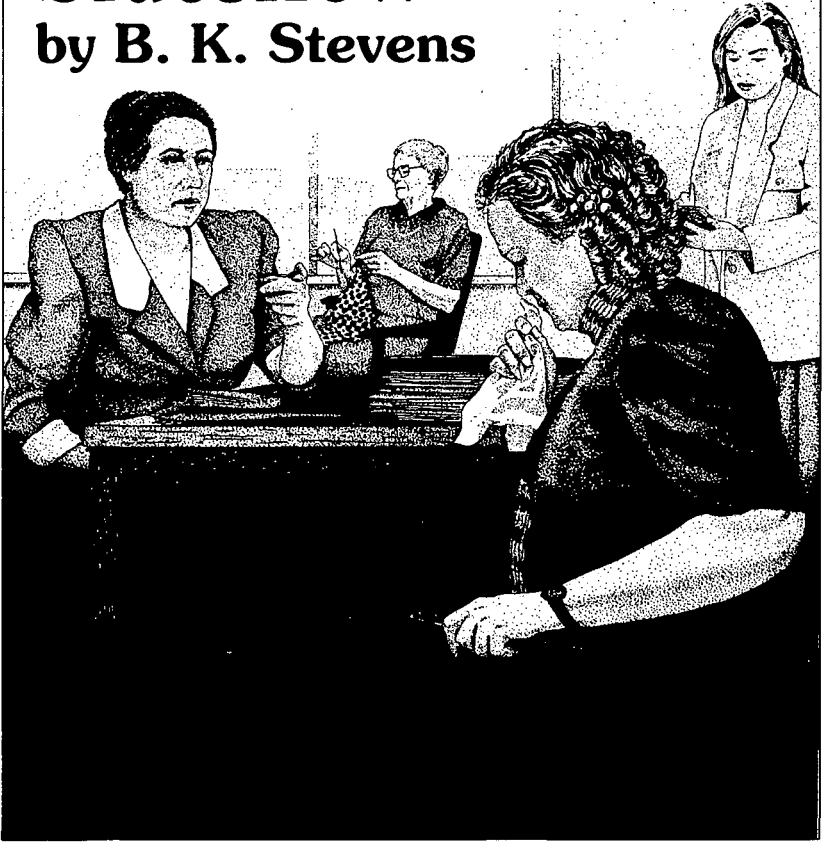
Inge Morath/Magnum

So long now. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1540 Broadway, New York, New York 10036. Please label your entry "December Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit.

The winning entry for the July Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 155.

# Sideshow

by B. K. Stevens



Standing on tiptoe, her pert, rounded chin tilted bravely upwards, Cherry Benson would barely clear five foot one. She was about forty years old and softly plump, dressed in a simple

black dress that looked, on her, demurely feminine, not at all severe. She had baby blue eyes and long lashes and rosy cheeks and a sweet, open face, and she wore a tiny cluster of bright red artificial cherries



nestled coyly among her golden curls. She was, I knew, exactly the sort of woman that Iphigenia Woodhouse instinctively despised.

When I showed Cherry Benson into the office, Miss Woodhouse gave her an appraising look, then scowled and stood up, positively looming over her desk, as if to emphasize the difference between Cherry Benson's daintiness and her own sturdy bulk. Miss Woodhouse is about ten years older than Cherry Benson and almost a foot taller, with a build most linebackers only dream of—not an ounce of flab, but solid layers of muscles everywhere that they might conceivably come in handy. As always, she wore a tailored skirt and blouse and no makeup, and had pulled her graying, slightly frizzy black hair straight back from her face. She gave Cherry Benson a stare that's been known to send police captains and minor drug lords scurrying for cover.

"Mrs. Benson," she said coldly. "How nice. Sit down. Unless you came about the Cronin kidnapping, in which case you might as well leave now. I don't interfere with ongoing police investigations. That is why you came, isn't it?"

Miss Woodhouse never goes out of her way to cater to new clients—I've often wished that

she *would* cater, just a little, so that we might get just a few more clients, and my paycheck might be just a little larger—but I'd never seen her so positively eager to push business out the door. Cherry Benson's palpable sweetness must really have been irritating her.

Mrs. Benson seemed oblivious to the problem. "Well, I *did* come about poor little Billy Cronin," she said, settling easily into one of the straight-backed wooden chairs facing Miss Woodhouse's desk. "I'm not asking you to *interfere*—I'd *never* ask anyone to interfere with the police—but I *do* have some special concerns, concerns that the police can't necessarily keep *foremost* in their minds, and I was thinking perhaps they could use a little *help*. If you give me five minutes to explain, perhaps you'll agree." She glanced toward the bay window at the east side of the office, where a woman in her late seventies sat in a red-cushioned rocking chair, tugging at a mass of knots just barely recognizable as macrame, paying no attention to any of us. Cherry Benson smiled at her warmly, then looked back at Miss Woodhouse. "Some of the details might be a little *upsetting*. Perhaps that lady might be more comfortable if we—"

"That lady," Miss Woodhouse cut in, "is my mother, Professor Woodhouse. Upsetting details do not make her uncomfortable. She customarily sits in on my consultations with clients. She finds them diverting. Does that make *you* uncomfortable, Mrs. Benson?"

Some prospective clients walk out when Miss Woodhouse announces that her mother is staying, some put up a fuss, some stammer and swallow hard and accept it but clearly don't like it. Cherry Benson looked like she honestly didn't mind. She aimed another bright, sweet smile in Professor Woodhouse's direction.

"I'm happy to meet you, Professor Woodhouse," she said. "I'll be grateful for any advice you might have for me."

Smarter and tougher than she looks, I thought, and gave her credit. Miss Woodhouse scowled again, evidently not pleased about failing to scare Cherry Benson off. "You asked for five minutes," she said. "You've got it. Harriet, take notes."

Hardly a necessary order, since I already had my pad and pencil ready, but I guess it was Miss Woodhouse's way of showing she was in control, at least of me. Cherry Benson set a

stack of photographs and newspaper clippings on the desk.

"Well," she said, "you obviously already know something about our tragedy, but let me start at the beginning, just to make sure I don't leave anything out. I run Cherry's Children's Center. Dear Billy Cronin has been one of our students almost since he was born. He started out as a Little Lamb, of course, and then moved on to the Kuddly Kittens, and just last month he graduated to our toddler class, the Playful Pups."

"Fascinating," Miss Woodhouse said, from behind clenched teeth.

Cherry Benson winked at her kindly. "Now, Billy's teacher in Kuddly Kittens was poor dear Susan O'Reilly. Billy adored her so much that his parents often hired her to babysit for him on evenings or weekends. Susan was babysitting for him last Sunday afternoon, as you probably know."

"As everyone in the state of Maryland knows by now," Miss Woodhouse said impatiently. "And someone came along, snatched Billy Cronin, cracked open Susan O'Reilly's skull, and dumped her in the Cronins' swimming pool. So far, no ransom demand or other word from the kidnappers, no trace of Billy Cronin, thousands of cops

combing the entire East Coast with no results. You have my sympathy, Mrs. Benson. It must be very hard, having a student kidnapped and a staff member killed. But I don't see how I can help. The police are already doing everything possible."

"Oh, but the police are making some *dreadful* mistakes," Cherry Benson protested. "You may scarcely believe this, Miss Woodhouse, but they seem to think that Susan was involved in the kidnapping somehow, that she was part of some terrible *conspiracy* to sell Billy on some sort of black market. They've been saying that perhaps her accomplice turned on her and killed her, to avoid sharing the profits. Can you imagine! Saying such a thing about poor Susan, after she died fighting to save poor Billy!"

Miss Woodhouse pursed her lips, looking interested for the first time. "What are their reasons for suspecting her?"

Cherry Benson lifted her hands to signal bewilderment. "No *real* reason. Oh, they say she ran up some big credit card bills in the last few months, and that shows she was desperate for money—but *all* young people are careless with money from time to time. And they say there were no signs of forced

entry at the Cronin house, so Susan apparently opened the door for the kidnapper. But she was so trusting; it wouldn't be hard for a kidnapper to think up a story that would make her open the door. Isn't that a much *likelier* explanation? Especially when you consider how sweet Susan was. Here. Just *look* at her."

Cherry Benson pushed the stack of photographs and clippings across the desk, and Miss Woodhouse started flipping through them, slowly and thoughtfully. "So, you want an investigation to clear Susan O'Reilly's memory—is that it?"

"That's *partly* it." Cherry Benson dabbed at her forehead with a lace-edged handkerchief embroidered with a tiny portrait of Snoopy. "The police seem to think someone else at our center helped Susan plan the kidnapping. You know how much bad publicity there's been about daycare centers, how willing people are to think that we abuse children and do all *sorts* of naughty things. It's *such* a burden to bear. Anyway, the police have been at the center constantly, questioning all of us, making us very nervous, very unhappy. And the reporters—they're worse than the police. An absolute *gang* of them show up at the Center every day, pointing their cameras

at us and shouting the cruelest questions. We've lost half our students already, and I don't know how long the other parents will hold up. Even the ones who believe in us all very *deeply* can't stand to have their children exposed to all this, and I can hardly blame them."

It did sound awful. Miss Woodhouse passed me the pictures, and I found myself gazing down at Susan O'Reilly's high school graduation portrait. She sure didn't look like a kidnapper. She looked nice—not pretty, really, but nice, the sort of ordinary, quiet, almost mousy girl you might not notice for years but could really get to like. I turned to a newspaper photograph and felt a sharp pang of loss, almost as if I *had* known her and liked her. Some ambitious photographer had dangled out of a helicopter to get this shot of Susan O'Reilly floating facedown in the swimming pool, her lacy summer dress spread out on the water. By the side of the pool was an overturned child-sized chair, with a battered-looking stuffed bear lying next to it. It was about as poignant as a picture can get. The photographer will probably get a Pulitzer, I thought, and felt like punching him.

Miss Woodhouse was getting interested in the case—I could

tell from the way she was tapping her pencil against her chin to a slow, regular beat. "It's not just Susan O'Reilly's memory you want to clear, then. It's your own reputation. Your business is being hurt by all the bad publicity."

"Yes, and the entire staff is so demoralized. Why, just this morning, my secretary quit. She couldn't take the pressure any more, she said, not a single day more of it. And my poor teachers! The police have been bearing down especially hard on two of them. There's Anita Cox—she's the Playful Pups teacher, and she shared an apartment with poor Susan. I suppose the police suspect her just because of that. And then there's our Busy Beavers teacher, Doug Haley."

The pencil-tapping came to an abrupt halt. "Doug Haley?" "A *man*? You have a *male* day-care teacher?"

Cherry Benson wagged a finger in gentle remonstrance. "Now, that's *just* the sort of attitude that's making them suspect poor Doug. People think it's *odd* and *suspicious* that a man would make a career of taking care of children, but why *should* it be? Dear Doug *loves* children, and he's *wonderful* with them. But the police are treating him like some *freak*. And it doesn't help that

he dated Susan, even though it ended *months* ago."

I heard a sudden, sharp series of snaps behind me and glanced toward the bay window. Professor Woodhouse was glaring silently, holding out her hand. Of course. She wanted to see the pictures. I scurried across the room, ashamed that she'd had to snap her fingers to get my attention. She took the pictures from me with her left hand—her right, by now, was hopelessly entangled in her macrame—and smiled graciously, to show she wasn't holding a grudge. She never does, against me.

Miss Woodhouse had progressed from tapping her pencil to chewing on it, a sure sign that she was thinking over the case, and that she wanted a cigarette. But, of course, she'd never light up in front of her mother. "Exactly what do you want me to do, Mrs. Benson?"

"Why, I want you to investigate," Cherry Benson said promptly. "I want you to prove that no one at my center had anything to do with this terrible kidnapping. I want you to prove that we're all completely innocent." She paused. "And, of course, if you could also find poor little Billy and bring him home safely, that would be nice, too."

Miss Woodhouse shook her head. "I could look into the case. But you might not like what I'd find. Frankly, I wouldn't be surprised if the police are right. Someone on your staff might very well be involved. And if I discovered that, I'd have to—"

A loud hiss from the east side of the room cut her off. We all jumped, and looked toward the bay window, and saw Professor Woodhouse holding up the newspaper photograph.

"I want to know more," she said sharply, "about the teddy."

Cherry Benson was the first to find her composure. "About what, dear?" she asked.

"Don't you 'dear' me, young woman," Professor Woodhouse snapped. "You haven't known me long enough—and if you *do* get to know me, you might change your mind. Now. The teddy bear in this picture looks like it's been dragged about a fair amount. Was it the little boy's favorite?"

"Well, yes," Cherry Benson said, obviously confused. "He took it with him everywhere, and always slept with it at naptime. If another child so much as touched it, he'd bellow so loudly that he'd throw the entire center into an uproar."

Professor Woodhouse nodded with satisfaction. "Iphigenia, you may take the case. You

need not fear discovering anything that would distress Mrs. Benson—who, by the way, might just as well face facts, grow up, and find herself a real first name.”

Miss Woodhouse’s entire manner had changed, as it always does when her mother speaks to her. Her shoulders slumped meekly, her head drooped, and her eyes took on a look of mingled devotion and terror. “Of course, I’ll take the case, if you advise it, Mother,” she said, her voice maybe one-tenth as loud as it had been a minute ago. “But doesn’t it seem a little early to be sure of what we’ll discover? The police must—”

“The police are blind, opinionated fools,” Professor Woodhouse shot back, “which is probably why you got along so well with them when you played at being a policewoman. The kidnapper must have wanted to keep the little boy quiet. Anyone who worked at the daycare center must have known that the little boy would fuss and cry constantly if he didn’t have his teddy. The kidnapper left the teddy behind. Ergo, the kidnapper did not work at the daycare center. You may take the case.”

Miss Woodhouse didn’t look entirely convinced, but naturally she didn’t argue. “Thank

you for your observation, Mother,” she said. “I had missed that point completely.”

“Of course you did,” Professor Woodhouse said, not at all appeased. “My observation required some insight into children. You have no such insight, never having taken the trouble to give me a grandchild.”

“I’m very sorry,” Miss Woodhouse said, slouching down still further in her chair. “But you didn’t want me to get married.”

Professor Woodhouse snatched up her macrame again. “Don’t you dare try to blame your failures on me, you nasty girl,” she said, tugging violently at the knots. “Had you ever presented me with a suitable candidate, I might perhaps have changed my mind.”

So that was how I ended up at Cherry’s Children’s Center at six o’clock the next morning, posing as the new secretary. It felt a little ironic: I had spent most of my adult life working as a secretary, had trained to be a private detective because I was itching for a complete change of pace—and still, it seemed, I always ended up answering phones and typing letters and taking notes at meetings. Still, this *was* my very first full-fledged under-

cover assignment, so I was mostly thrilled.

Cherry Benson was mostly thrilled by the arrangement, too, partly because she needed a substitute secretary and partly because she didn't want her teachers to know she'd hired a detective—that, she thought, would make them jumpier than ever. Much better to slip me quietly into the scene, to help her handle unpleasant phone calls and to forage discreetly for scraps of information about Billy Cronin. Privately, Miss Woodhouse told me that I should also learn all I could about the staff. Even if the teddy bear evidence *did* seem to indicate that none of them had actually carried out the kidnapping, we still had to worry about conspiracy possibilities. So I was to keep an eye on everyone.

My first hour of undercover work passed quietly, following Cherry Benson around as she showed me through the center and briefed me on its routines. Starting tomorrow, I'd be the first staff person to arrive in the morning, to finish up left-over paperwork and make sure everything was ready for the children.

"Now, this is the Busy Beavers' Den," Cherry Benson said, leading me into a large, sparkling room with red and

white gingham curtains hanging in the oversized windows. She pointed up to the exposed ceiling beams. "Lisa Kramer has her birthday tomorrow, and her parents are bringing in a piñata for the party—we'll have to haul a ladder out of the storeroom and hang the piñata from one of those beams. Can you handle that?"

"No problem," I said. "Is tomorrow morning soon enough?"

"Fine," she said, and we finished our tour of the building. All the classrooms were tidy and cheerful, with brightly colored chairs and tables, stacks of toys lining the walls, books displayed invitingly on shelves. Not a bad place for kids to spend their days, I thought, and tried to imagine dark conspiracies being plotted in these sunny rooms. It was a ludicrous image.

The press didn't seem to share my opinion. By six thirty minivans clogged the street outside the daycare center, and reporters began scrambling out, getting their cameras into firing position. When the teachers started to arrive, they had to pass through a gauntlet of shouted questions and accusing lenses. Then a rusting green Ford pulled into the driveway, and the reporters surged around it, louder and more in-



sistent than ever. I felt sorry for the tall, sandy-haired young man who climbed out of the car and had to edge sideways through the reporters, shrugging and head-shaking his way to the center's door as they shoved microphones into his face. Nobody should have to fight that hard to get to work.

He was flushed and shaky by the time he got to the office. "Golly!" he said, wiping his forehead with his hand. "I need a drink." He staggered toward the miniature refrigerator, grabbed a can of apple juice, popped it open, then looked me over apprehensively. "You're not a reporter, are you? Or a cop?"

"No," I said. "I'm Harriet Russo, the new secretary."

"The new—oh, that's right. I heard Alice got scared off yesterday." He put down his apple juice and walked over to shake my hand. He was generally skinny but had a round, almost chubby face, with a blunt nose and very large, very nervous brown eyes. "I'm Doug Haley, the Busy Beavers' teacher. You must have guts, signing on here at a time like this. It's a great place, really, but awful crazy right now. I hope it quiets down soon."

It showed no signs of quieting down immediately. There was another roar from the

press outside, and we both looked out the window to see a short, wiry young woman with a mass of curly red hair emerging from her car and plunging resolutely toward the door, swatting at reporters with her purse. "That's Anita Cox," Doug said, smiling affectionately. "She's the Playful Pups' teacher. Now, *there's* the definition of guts."

She stalked into the office, Doug introduced us, and she gave my hand a single, decisive shake. "Welcome to hell, Harriet," she said. "I hope those damn bloodsuckers didn't give you a hard time when you got here."

"No, I arrived before they did," I said, a little awed by the deep, clear intelligence burning in her eyes. She was barely five feet tall, but somehow she reminded me of Miss Woodhouse.

"Smart move." She glanced at Doug's can of apple juice. "Hitting the stuff already? It's not even seven o'clock."

"Well, I had a rough night," Doug said, cringing in apology. "These two cops showed up at my apartment and questioned me for three hours. They kept asking the same thing over and over, wanting to know why Susan and I broke up. What could I tell them? I never understood it myself. I liked her, I thought

she liked me, we went out, everything seemed to be going great, I was thinking about a ring, and then—boom! She gives me this speech two months ago, says she can't ever date me again and can't explain why. I guess she just decided she didn't like me that much after all. What could I do? I accepted it, that's all. But those cops acted like there had to be more to it, like I was hiding some big guilty secret."

Anita patted him on the shoulder. "That's the way cops are. They're going after you because you're the obvious suspect. They always go after the obvious suspect. But don't worry. It'll work out all right in the end—it always does. We'd better get to our classrooms." She shot me a wry smile. "If the cops show up here and ask you any questions, Harriet, just stonewall. Don't even give them your Social Security number or they'll try to pin the murder on you. Maybe that sounds ridiculous, but cops do things like that all the time. Trust me."

The cops never showed up that day—a major relief, since by now a fair number of Annapolis cops knew me from my work on Miss Woodhouse's other cases, and I was nervous about having my cover blown.

At three o'clock Cherry Benson bustled into the office.

"Could you do me a big favor, dear?" she asked. "Could you go to poor dear Susan's funeral? I'd planned to go myself, but Anita says she absolutely has to go, so I'll have to cover her class—I can't ask you to do *that*, because you're not certified. And I need someone to represent the center at the funeral, to convey our condolences to dear little Billy's parents. Anita volunteered, but she—well, she's a dear, but she's not always quite as *tactful* as one might wish, you know?"

I didn't really know, but after just one short conversation with Anita, I could guess. I reached for my purse. "I'm happy to help," I said with complete sincerity. I'd been dying to go to the funeral. In practically every mystery novel I'd ever read, the detective learned a lot from going to funerals.

**T**he cemetery was on the other side of town. Anita led the way in her car, and I followed in mine. It was a sad, noisy scene. Scores of reporters, dozens of cops trying to blend into the crowd of mourners; but there weren't many mourners. Billy Cronin's father was there—I recognized him as the fresh-faced yuppie type I'd seen dodging the cameras in quick

clips on the local news. He was maybe a few pounds over the target but undeniably gorgeous, with blond hair and big blue eyes and the cutest little chipmunk cheeks. Standing next to him was a taller, darker, slightly older, much craggier man, with "lawyer" written all over him. The only other genuine mourners were a middle-aged woman in a shabby overcoat, Anita, and me.

"This is awful," I whispered to Anita as a harassed-looking priest mumbled his way through the service. "Why didn't more people come? Where are her parents?"

"Dead," Anita said curtly. "Killed in a car accident, both of them, six months ago. And she was an only child. The woman in the crummy coat is her father's sister—she must be the one paying for this. She was the only living relative Susan had, as far as she knew." She looked around the cemetery, obviously dissatisfied. "I thought maybe we'd at least have some music. I thought maybe some of her father's friends would come. But I guess they're on the road, like he always was."

"Poor Susan," I said, and meant it. Everything I had learned about her life made it sound bleaker and lonelier.

At least the service was brief. The priest said some fairly standard things about tender young shoots nipped in the bud, prayed a bit, and that was all. He closed his Bible, and the pitiful excuse for a crowd started to break up.

Time for me to express Cherry's Children's Center's personal condolences. I made my way over to Mr. Cronin, with Anita Cox following right behind me.

Jeff Cronin was making furtive swipes at his nose with a rapidly decomposing Kleenex. "We never should have moved here," he was saying to the lawyer. "We *knew* that the East Coast was dangerous, that it's the wrong place to raise a child. And now look at what's happened. Billy gone, and poor Susan dead."

The lawyer murmured something consoling, but it didn't seem to amount to much—the usual "there, there" type of thing—so I felt justified in interrupting. "Mr. Cronin," I said, stepping forward, "I'm the new secretary at Cherry's Children's Center. Cherry asked me to say how terribly sorry we all are, how much we hope that Billy will be safe at home very soon."

He seemed about to say something, but the lawyer held up a hand to stop him. He was

in his mid-forties, obviously worked out, might have been handsome if it weren't for the chronic sneer. "Mr. Cronin acknowledges your expression of sympathy," he said, "but he has no comment to make at this time. If Mrs. Benson has anything further to communicate, tell her to contact my office. P. Philip Barnard, Attorney-at-Law. The Cronins are weighing their litigative options and do not wish to have any direct contact with any representatives of the center."

"No, Phil," Jeff Cronin objected, "that sounds too cold. Kathy and I don't blame Kathy for—"

The lawyer shook his head. "Don't close off any avenues, Jeff, not until you've had a chance to assess the situation. Here, I'll drive you home. Margaret will fix you something soothing, and maybe later, if you and Kathy feel well enough, we can all drop by the club together."

I saw Jeff Cronin cringe at that. Well, of course. Who'd want to go out to dinner at a time like this, to put up with a lot of nosy sympathy and prying questions? No, he and his wife would naturally want to stay home tonight, to perch by the phone and hope for good news from the police or, at least, for a ransom demand

from the kidnappers. But he had the look of a weak-willed, compliant sort of guy who might end up at the club whether he wanted to or not. He gave us a nod—a sympathetic one, I thought—and let the lawyer lead him to his car. Anita, watching them, seemed positively hunched up with hostility. "God!" she said. "I need a drink. And I *don't* mean apple juice."

Another perfect opening. "I could use one, too," I said. "Do you want to go to a bar? You don't think the reporters would follow us there, do you?"

Anita snorted kindly, pitying my ignorance. "Are you kidding? Of course they would. Perfect front-page photo—two of Cherry's employees get sauced in public, demonstrating our decadence and lack of family values. Let's go to my place."

This was almost too easy. Once again, I followed in my car as she drove through the narrow, brick-paved streets of Annapolis's historic district. We stopped at a quaintly substandard, white-clapboard house. Downstairs, two apathetic local artists silkscreened T-shirts for tourists. Upstairs was the one bedroom apartment Anita had shared with Susan O'Reilly.

"This is it," Anita said, pushing the door open. She cast a bitterly sorrowful look around the living room. "Susan slept on the couch, let me have the bedroom. That was just like her—too nice for her own good. Well. I'm getting changed. Wine's in the fridge, real stuff's in the cupboard next to the sink." She went into the bedroom and closed the door behind her.

I looked around the living room, desperate to investigate but not sure where I should start. There was a coat closet just inside the front door, and that seemed as good a place as any. I opened the door cautiously, afraid of squeaking, and saw that the closet hadn't been used for coats after all. It was Susan's personal closet. Well, that made sense, if she'd let Anita have the bedroom. The closet was about as full as it could get—crammed at the back, half a dozen pairs of Levi's at various stages of the fading process, some well-worn sweaters and blouses and a few sensible skirts, raggedy sneakers and two pairs of scuffed loafers on the floor. And, in front, carefully spaced and encased in plastic covers, eight gorgeous dresses of the knock-you-dead-and-destroy-your-pay-check variety, three pairs of designer jeans, a cashmere

sweater, two silk blouses, several pairs of fantastic shoes with perilously high heels. One of the dresses still had the price tag on it, and a glimpse at the digits sent me into hyperventilation. So, I thought. That's how Susan O'Reilly ran up those big credit card charges.

I eased the closet door shut and walked over to a double bookcase set against the wall. Scanning the left-hand side, I spotted a lot of my old friends—all the Lord Peter novels, all the Miss Marples, a bunch of Rabbi Smalls and Peter Shandys and Annie Laurances and Jacqueline Kirbys. Good taste, I thought—but one really shouldn't neglect Inspector Wexford and Alan Grant, not to mention dear Hercule. The right-hand side of the bookcase had a distinctly different character. *Forbidden Love, Secret Lust, Hidden Passion, Love Forbidden, Lust in Hiding, Passionate Secret*. All the covers featured longhaired maidens swooning in the arms of men with brooding eyes, massive chests, and excessive biceps. Wondering which of the roommates was addicted to this stuff, I picked up *Hide the Lustful Secret* and saw a bookplate on the title page—"From the Library of Susan Penhurst O'Reilly." Well, that settled it.

There's nothing wrong with picking up a book while you're waiting for your hostess to rejoin you. When I heard the bedroom door open behind me, though, I was feeling so sneaky and self-conscious that I jumped involuntarily, stuffed the book into my purse, and spun around quickly, facing Anita with my most innocent smile. "Just looking at your shelves," I said. It sounded about as stupid as you'd guess it would sound.

I had expected her to exchange the dark sweater and skirt she'd worn to the funeral for something more comfortable, like jeans. Instead, she'd put on a tweed suit. She looked at me curiously. "Didn't you get yourself a drink?"

"No, I—I thought I'd wait for you," I said, still working too hard at sounding innocent.

She shrugged and walked into the kitchen. "Well, okay. I'm afraid I'll have to kick you out in just a little while, though. I've got an appointment to keep."

That was a disappointment. I'd hoped we'd get down to some serious drinking and commiserating, that she'd loosen up and talk about Susan. As it was, I had time for just one glass of wine, and she downed two quick scotches but didn't loosen up at all—just stared off

into space, emitting absent-minded monosyllables in response to my clever conversational maneuvers. After half an hour, she stood up abruptly.

"Thanks for the drink," I said, taking my cue. "I'll see you at work tomorrow. I sure hope the reporters don't surround the place and turn it into a circus again."

"It's not a circus—just a sideshow," she said, still sounding absentminded. She was digging around in her suitcase-sized purse, as if checking to make sure she had her keys. "And we can't count on any big change by tomorrow. Soon, though."

By five o'clock, I was back at Woodhouse Investigations. Miss Woodhouse was downstairs in the converted parlor that serves as her office, sitting at her computer, the telephone receiver cradled under her chin. That's how she does most of her investigating, since Professor Woodhouse gets cranky whenever her daughter leaves the house. As for the professor herself, she sat in her rocker, popcorn fragments of various hues set out before her on a folding table, cementing together a mosaic portrait of Mick Jagger. She gave me a happy little wave, and her daughter finished her call and swung around in her swivel chair.

"So, Harriet." She didn't even try to keep the sarcasm out of her voice. "Back from your day at Babysitting, Incorporated. Learn anything useful?"

"Not really," I admitted. "I met everyone on the staff and got some scattered impressions—"

"I'm not interested in scattered impressions," Miss Woodhouse cut in. "Any solid suspicions?"

"No," I said, blushing. "Everyone seemed really nice. I *did* go to Susan O'Reilly's funeral, and I met Mr. Cronin, but his lawyer wouldn't let him speak to me. He seems to think the Cronins should sue the center."

"Ah, yes. The lawyer." She flipped through a yellow pad filled with pencil notes. "P. Philip Barnard. Haven't you heard of him, Harriet? He's a real hotshot, lots of society clients. Just the sort of pompous bastard who'd argue that the center was negligent for hiring Susan O'Reilly and misleading the Cronins into thinking she was reliable. He and his wife—she's a physician—are also close personal friends of the Cronins. Just about their closest, judging from what I heard today. Barnard used his connections to get the Cronins their membership in the Bay

Club—four months ago, I think."

"He must have a lot of connections," I said, impressed. I'd had some contact with the Bay Club on the very first case I'd worked on with Miss Woodhouse, and I knew that most of its members had lived in Annapolis for generations. "The Cronins are pretty new to the area, aren't they? He said something about wishing they'd never moved to the East Coast."

Miss Woodhouse nodded. "They moved here from Minneapolis just over a year ago. Jeff Cronin's an engineering prodigy, got a gold-plated job with Westinghouse. And Kathy Cronin's a commercial real estate whiz, found herself a nook at Central Properties. So they're loaded. Pretty good prospects for underpaid, ransom-hungry daycare workers."

"I guess," I said reluctantly, hating to think it. "But there *hasn't* been any ransom demand. And if you could've just *seen* the place, Miss Woodhouse. It's so *cheerful*, so *wholesome*, and all the people there really seem to love children."

"Of course they do," she said curtly. "They're paid to seem to love children, and I'm sure they perform their act well. But when you get right down to it, they're babysitters, nothing



more, people too stupid and unambitious to attempt—”

“Not another word, you nasty girl,” Professor Woodhouse said sharply. She was plastering down the pink popcorn fragments so energetically that Mick Jagger’s mouth had assumed truly monstrous proportions. “And just where would *you* be, I’d like to know, if it hadn’t been for the babysitters who kept you from destroying yourself while I was teaching? After Mr. Woodhouse went on his journey, after I was left with an oversized, egotistical toddler to support, what would have become of us if I hadn’t been able to entrust you to those wonderful, warmhearted women? They weren’t just acting a part—they really *did* love children, even a messy, ungrateful, nasty child like you. They wiped your nose and taught you to wash your hands and helped to make you into the barely tolerable young person you are today.”

“I’m very sorry, Mother,” Miss Woodhouse said, looking thoroughly ashamed. “You’re right, of course—you’re always right. I shouldn’t speak so thoughtlessly. Here, let me fix your dinner. The grocery delivered a lovely, plump chicken today. I thought I might cut it up and fry it and—”

“Fry it?” Professor Woodhouse said, scandalized. “If that isn’t just like you. We shan’t fry it, of course. How disgustingly greasy. We shall soak it in vermouth, stuff it with onions and olives, and roast it. Harriet, I shall require your help. And later, I shall want to hear about everything you saw and heard and thought today. My daughter may not be interested in your scattered impressions, but *I* am.”

Unfortunately, Professor Woodhouse dozed off between the onion and olive stuffed chicken and the chocolate chip pie. I helped Miss Woodhouse put her to bed, then went home to my own apartment. Our dinner conversation had been dominated by anecdotes proving just how alarming and unsatisfactory a child Miss Woodhouse had been, so we didn’t have a chance to say anything more about the case that night.

The next morning I arrived at Cherry’s Children’s Center promptly at six. A place like that feels slightly spooky at such an early hour—it’s so obviously designed to be filled by little bodies charging about that it doesn’t feel quite right when it’s empty. I walked resolutely to the office and doublechecked yesterday’s attendance figures, class plans, audio-visual signout sheets.

Everything seemed to be in order, except that Anita Cox had signed out a tape recorder and a camera and had apparently forgotten to return them before she left for the day. Well, I'd ask her about them as soon as she arrived.

I noticed a pansy-bordered Post-it note Cherry Benson had stuck on the calendar. That's right—Lisa Kramer's birthday party. I glanced around the office and saw the huge bunny-shaped piñata her parents had dropped off, stuck in a corner. Now to haul out a ladder and string the piñata up from one of the exposed beams in the Busy Beavers' Den. No problem.

But as I was lugging the ladder out of the storeroom, I heard a sound I shouldn't have heard—a thin, high wail. Dear God, I thought. That's a child crying—a very small child. How could parents forget to pick up their child? How could Cherry be careless enough to leave when there was still a child trapped inside the center?

I let the ladder thud to the floor and ran. There was the child, all right—and not just any child. It was Billy Cronin, filthy and groggily frantic but easily recognizable from the newspaper photographs, sitting in the hall outside the Busy Beavers' Den and sucking his thumb like it was a caviar

lollipop. I raced over and picked him up. I didn't think about disturbing evidence, didn't think about anything except that here was a child no one had ever expected to see alive again, twitching and wailing softly and obviously in need of comfort.

"There, there, Billy," I crooned. "It's all over. You'll be back with Mommy and Daddy soon. Everything's fine."

He didn't agree. He sobbed and hiccuped and took his thumb from his mouth long enough to jab it toward the doorway. Confused, I stepped into the Den and saw that everything was far from fine. In the middle of the room, a red wooden chair was lying on its side; directly above it, something was already hanging from one of the exposed beams. It wasn't a piñata. It was Anita Cox.

**T**hat was the end of my first undercover assignment. In a panicky blur, I dragged the ladder over, scrambled up, pressed my fingers against Anita's throat and wrists, searched for a pulse, knew I wouldn't find one. No living person's neck had ever drooped at that impossible angle. I scooped Billy up and ran back to the office, then dialed 911, Miss Woodhouse,

and the Cronins, in that order. I was still listening to Kathy Cronin's joyful, unbelieving sobs when the first police cars roared into the driveway. I can't describe Billy's reunion with his parents because I didn't see it. I didn't see much of anything that happened at the center that morning—a glimpse of Jeff Cronin and his lawyer being led into the Playful Pups' Palace by a detective, and that was about it. I spent the next few hours closeted in the Kuddly Kittens' Korner with a succession of cops—first cops in uniforms, then cops in suits—repeating my statement maybe a hundred times. Around ten, Miss Woodhouse showed up. She stood by and listened to my recital—after all those repetitions, I had it pretty smooth—then put her hand on my shoulder and gave the latest cop a withering stare.

"Can't you let her go now, Harry?" she asked. "She's got nothing more to say. She's my assistant, she was here on assignment, she happened to be the one to find the baby and the body. And she's had one hell of a morning. Give her a break."

The cop stood up and sighed. "Yeah, I guess we're done with her. Okay, miss. You can go. But stay available."

Miss Woodhouse walked me out to my car. "What's going

on?" I asked. "How are they interpreting all this?"

She shrugged. "Well, the captain—never particularly renowned either for his powers of observation or for his deductive capacities—says this proves that Susan O'Reilly and Anita Cox planned the kidnapping together. Something went wrong Sunday—a quarrel about splitting the money, probably—and Cox killed O'Reilly. Then Cox took the kid, drugged him, and stashed him somewhere, thinking she'd carry out the scheme herself. Ransom, most likely, or some blackmarket baby sale. But she didn't have the guts to go it alone, and her conscience was bothering her because she'd killed her friend. She stewed a few days, then left the baby in a safe place, stood on that red chair, wrapped a jump-rope around her neck, took the leap."

"I just can't believe that," I said, shaking my head. "Anita had something on her mind yesterday, but I'll swear she wasn't feeling guilty. Angry, yes. Cocky. Not guilty. Isn't anyone even considering any other explanations?"

"One person is." From the look in her eyes, I could tell she meant the homicide lieutenant she'd been engaged to years ago. "He doesn't think it's suicide—her neck was broken, and

he says the drop from a chair wouldn't be enough to do that. Plus her face doesn't look nearly as awful as you'd expect with a homemade hanging. So he thinks a third person might be involved in the conspiracy, and maybe this third person killed both O'Reilly and Cox. He's taken Doug Haley in for questioning. Either way, it's fatal publicity for our client. I'd say Cherry's Children's Center has served its last peanut butter and jelly sandwich."

With that gloomy prediction in mind, I drove back to Woodhouse Investigations. Professor Woodhouse was waiting for me. She'd finished her Mick Jagger mosaic and was hard at work on Keith Richards. She had a matched set planned, to hang above the living room mantel, and had already purchased the antique frames. "My poor little Harriet," she said, rapping her cane on the floor to signify sympathy. "Iphigenia told me about the nasty thing you found. How terribly upsetting! How shocking for a sweet, innocent girl like you to witness something so gory and violent! You must make us a nice pot of tea and sit down in Iphigenia's nice, comfy chair and give me all the details."

It took a long time. She wasn't satisfied with my initial description of the suicide scene,

pressed me for more concrete adjectives, eventually had me draw her a detailed sketch of the room and the body. Then we moved on to everything I had heard and seen yesterday—all my conversations with Anita and the other people at the center, the funeral, the apartment Anita had shared with Susan O'Reilly. Professor Woodhouse seemed especially interested in my description of the bookshelves.

"An interesting selection of detective novels," she observed. "Did they belong to Miss O'Reilly or Miss Cox?"

"To Anita Cox, probably," I said, smiling a little. How typical for a former professor to fixate on books. "At least, I know the romance novels were Susan O'Reilly's. I saw her nameplate in one of them—and then Anita came into the room suddenly, and I ended up stuffing the book into my purse. Geez, that's right. I must still have it." I pulled it out and handed her *Hide the Lustful Secret*. "Here. You can see for yourself."

Professor Woodhouse adjusted her spectacles and peered at the nameplate. "This Susan Penhurst O'Reilly was unmarried?"

"That's right," I said, nodding.

"O'Reilly," she said, squinting thoughtfully. "An Irishman. That would fit. Do you know what her father did for a living?"

"No," I said patiently. After several months at Woodhouse Investigations, I'd gotten used to the way the professor's mind wandered off in trivial, irrelevant directions. "Anita said he used to be on the road a lot. Maybe he was a salesman."

Professor Woodhouse shook her head. "Not a salesman. Well. It all seems quite plain, doesn't it?"

"Miss Woodhouse thinks so," I agreed sadly. "She says Susan and Anita must've planned the kidnapping together, and then they got into a fight when Anita came to take little Billy, and—"

"Little Billy! Little Billy!" Professor Woodhouse said, disgusted. "How weary I am of hearing about that tiresome little Billy and that melodramatic kidnapping. Kidnapping! You must push yourself to think more logically, Harriet. Consider Susan Penhurst O'Reilly. Here you have a quiet young girl wearing sweatshirts and sneakers, working at a daycare center, reading romance novels and dating a fellow daycare worker in her spare time. Then, quite suddenly, she tells the young man she can see him no

more, and she exhausts her credit buying expensive dresses. How would you explain such a metamorphosis?"

I thought hard. "Well, I guess she was getting sick of her way of life, and she wanted more money, maybe so she could attract more exciting men. That's why she and Anita planned the kidnapping and—"

"Not another word," she said severely, "about this so-called kidnapping. Has it never occurred to you that she might have *already* attracted a more exciting man?"

I stared at her. This "so-called" kidnapping? A more exciting man? Then it came to me. "Jeff Cronin," I gasped. "He's incredibly cute—blue eyes and blond hair and chipmunk cheeks—he could pass for Robert Redford's pudgy younger brother. And all those books about hidden, secret, forbidden loves—oh my God! Susan was having an affair with Jeff Cronin! And maybe he sneaked back to the house to see her, and she threatened to tell his wife, and they fought, and he accidentally killed her, and he panicked, and he took Billy, but of course it wasn't a *real* kidnapping since it was his own son, and he—"

Professor Woodhouse held up her hand. "You are making progress. You lack a well-disci-

plined intellect, my dear Harriet, but all things considered, you are doing quite well. Now. Tell me what you make of Anita Cox. A camera and a tape recorder checked out from the center, probably concealed in that voluminous purse you observed yesterday evening. Changing into a suit after the funeral. Miss Marple on her shelves, but no Hercule Poirot. Lord Peter, but no Inspector Wexford. Rabbi Small, but no Alan Grant. What do you infer from all this?"

Not much, at first. "I guess she liked reading about amateur detectives, not policemen," I said tentatively. "That would fit—she made a crack about how the police always go after the obvious suspect. As for the camera and the tape recorder—oh, professor! Now I see. Anita knew about the affair with Jeff Cronin. She was Susan's roommate and best friend, after all. So Anita figured Jeff Cronin had killed Susan, and she thought she could be some kind of amateur detective herself, and she went off to confront him or collect evidence—she *did* say something about a big change, like she expected the case to crack open soon. But it didn't work. Jeff Cronin realized what she was up to, and he killed her and made it look like a suicide. Oh,

that *has* to be it! I *knew* Anita was too nice to be mixed up in a kidnapping."

Professor Woodhouse slapped my hand. "I *told* you I didn't want to hear another word about kidnapping. Nevertheless, on the whole, you are doing quite well. Your theory is consistent and fairly plausible. It is not yet accurate, but that is perhaps too much to expect. You still lack one vital fact. And that is the fact I must verify now." She plastered a bright red popcorn lump on the end of Keith Richard's cigarette and pushed the mosaic aside. "Harriet, get the car. We are going for a drive."

"For a drive?" I said, amazed. Professor Woodhouse almost never leaves the house. "Where would you like to go, professor?"

"To the house of Cora Elizabeth Penhurst." She stood up, leaning heavily on her cane. "It is a large house, very white, columns essentially Doric though too fussy about the top, mildly ostentatious but on the whole quite dignified. I cannot at the moment recall the address, but I am sure I shall recognize the house, and the street. I gave a most stimulating lecture there some thirty years ago, for the Daughters of the American Revolution, titled 'Medea and Jason: The

Dysfunctional Family in Classical Literature.’” She frowned, as if not sure that she’d gotten it exactly right. “Or words to that effect. At any rate, there was a lively exchange over sherry afterwards, Cora Elizabeth Penhurst was a gracious hostess, and for a time we struck up a sort of friendship. Not a particularly close friendship, mind you, nor a permanent one, for eventually she became a nasty old woman. But I shall never forget her.” She picked up her shawl. “And now I wish to see her again.”

I didn’t want to go. Miss Woodhouse was bound to come home any time, and I wanted to know what was happening with the case, but Miss Woodhouse had made it clear when she hired me that I was always to do anything her mother asked, so I got my purse. I scrawled a quick note for Miss Woodhouse—“Visiting C. E. Penhurst”—and helped the professor to the car.

We drove around Annapolis for half an hour before she spotted a street that looked right, and then it took us a long time to find the house. It was off by itself, smack on the banks of the Severn, and it fit her description exactly—big, white, many-columned, ostentatious in a dignified way. She hadn’t mentioned the immense

grounds or the private dock, but they didn’t surprise me. This was how the richest, oldest families in Annapolis lived. The middle-aged woman who answered the door also fit right into the picture. Straight-spined, unsmiling, tweed and starched linen, thoroughly respectable—just the sort a wealthy old woman like Cora Elizabeth Penhurst would hire as her housekeeper and companion.

“Mrs. Penhurst is out on the east lawn, taking the afternoon air,” she said, speaking only to Professor Woodhouse. I was obviously beneath her notice. “I shall give her your card, and see if she is at liberty to receive you.”

Wow. Now the whole visit felt worthwhile. I’d never thought I’d actually hear somebody outside of a movie say something that snooty. The housekeeper left us sitting in a plant-and-doily-filled parlor, then came back in a few minutes.

“Mrs. Penhurst will see you now,” she said impassively and led us through the house to the east lawn.

Cora Elizabeth Penhurst sat in a wheelchair, her body tiny and brittle, her sparse white hair barely covering her scalp, her bright little eyes nearly enveloped in wrinkles. A copy of



today's *Capital* lay on her lap. "Professor Minerva Woodhouse," she said, and I was amazed by the clarity and strength of her voice. "I remember you. You delivered a lecture on Medea. At the time, I thought her approach rather too extreme, your analysis rather too sympathetic. I have since reconsidered."

"Yes, they *can* be trying," Professor Woodhouse said, settling her bulk into one of the white wrought-iron chairs set out on the lawn and motioning me toward another. "My own daughter, for example. She could have had a brilliant academic career, but she chose to become a policewoman. And then, for a time, she thought of marrying a Jew."

"A Jew!" Mrs. Penhurst said, scandalized. "That is even worse." She curled her thin upper lip and scowled at me. "This is the imprudent young woman?"

"No," Professor Woodhouse said. The housekeeper came out again, carrying a silver tray with a cut glass decanter and glasses. She poured us each some sherry and then stood back, ready to serve again. Professor Woodhouse emptied her glass at one gulp. "This is Harriet Russo," she said. "A Papist of Italian origin, but decent. Not like most of them."

I swallowed my sherry and held out my glass for a refill, too stunned to speak. How could Professor Woodhouse say a thing like that? I'd known she was conservative, of course, but I'd never thought she was so prejudiced. And although Miss Woodhouse had never told me just why she broke off her engagement, I hadn't gotten the impression that religion was the real obstacle. Well, I was certainly learning a lot this afternoon. And I wasn't so sure that I liked Professor Woodhouse very much any more.

"That is rare," Mrs. Penhurst was saying. She took a healthy sip of her sherry. "Mind you, I try not to be too narrow in my views. A flute—I think I could have tolerated a flute. Perhaps even a clarinet. But a saxophone? What civilized person ever played a saxophone? And no trace of propriety, of true harmony. All cacophony and madness and disorder. And the rampant ethnicity of it! She made a choice I could not possibly accept. What rational person could blame me?"

"Not I," Professor Woodhouse said stoutly. I was finding the conversation very difficult to follow. Well, what could you expect? They were both nearly eighty. Naturally they were talking nonsense. I concentrated on enjoying my sherry,

which was very mellow, very smooth, very soothing. Smoothing and soothing, I thought, and half-giggled at the sound of it.

Professor Woodhouse shot me a warning glance and drained her own glass. "I certainly do not blame you, Cora," she said, and leaned forward, lowering her voice. "But you blamed yourself, did you not?"

It could have been a shrug, or a shudder—I wasn't sure. Mrs. Penhurst's shoulders definitely quivered for a moment. "Well, well. Unforeseen events sometimes force reconsiderations, elicit regrets, even when one's actions have been absolutely above reproach. Finality, you know. It makes one think of one's own end and weakens one's resolutions. For a time, I doubted myself. I thought of making amends: Not with the original offenders—that would have been distasteful, and it was by that time at any rate impossible. But with the result." She picked up the *Capital*, stared at it, sighed, let it drop back into her lap. "I was wrong to doubt. Subsequent incidents have confirmed that. Unsound at the root, unsound at the bud. Only those who have proved themselves to be reliable deserve to be rewarded. I know that now, and I shall make everything once

again as it was. I shall never doubt myself again."

"That," said Professor Woodhouse, "is exactly what I came here to learn." Then abruptly, her chin sank down on her chest, and her eyes closed.

The housekeeper stepped over to Mrs. Penhurst. "I'll see your guests out. You mustn't tire yourself, Cora."

Cora. I would have expected the housekeeper to call her Mrs. Penhurst. They must have been together a long time for Mrs. Penhurst to accept such informality. But I was suddenly too tired to try to figure it out. My head was aching something awful, and my eyes seemed to be getting blurry. Not terribly surprising, really—nothing but tea and toast all day, and then two glasses of sherry. Or was it three? Listening to these four old ladies ramble on had really gotten me confused.

No—only two old ladies. The housekeeper wasn't old, and there was no fourth person. Or was there? With an effort, I lifted my head up and tried to count. Mrs. Penhurst in her wheelchair, Professor Woodhouse sitting next to her, the housekeeper standing nearby—and yes, there was another person. Not an old lady, though. Not a lady at all. I tried

to focus on his face. I'd seen it before.

The housekeeper was standing over me now, pushing my forehead back with one hand, pulling on my cheeks with the other, staring into my eyes. How rude. I started to push her away but lost interest in the attempt before my hand made it halfway to her arm. "She's nearly out," I heard her saying, in a voice that sounded miles away. "She won't give you any trouble. And the professor's asleep already. Now what? Car or boat?"

"Better use the car," the man's voice said. He came closer to me, but I still couldn't figure out who he was. For some reason, I got a flash of the covers of Susan O'Reilly's romance novels, of the dark, craggy men with their brooding eyes and sneering lips. Not Robert Redford, I thought groggily. He'd never make one of those covers. They go for the Heathcliff type. "We'll have to get rid of their car eventually anyway," Heathcliff was saying. "And I don't think anybody would believe they'd take a boat out. The old lady's too senile to pilot, and I heard the girl's from Ohio—she may never have been on a boat in her life. We'll have to think of a quiet road, with a stiff drop.

Maybe we should wait until after dark."

"No," the housekeeper said sharply. "Get them out of here right away. That detective's probably home by now. When she sees that her mother's missing, she'll start looking for her."

"She'd never in a million years think to look *here*," Heathcliff said. He had grabbed me under the arms and was starting to pull me out of the chair. I tried to resist, but my body felt too heavy. It took all my energy just to listen to his words. "We've managed everything just fine," he said. "Thank God you came over today. Nobody's got any reason to connect Aunt Cora to any of this."

Aunt Cora. It was very confusing, because Heathcliff was an orphan—how could he have an aunt? I forced my eyes all the way open, looked him straight in the face, and saw that it wasn't Heathcliff at all. "P. Philip Barnard, Attorney-at-Law," I said out loud, and suddenly I knew what the *P* stood for.

"Damn!" He let me drop back into the chair. "I thought you said she was nearly out, Margaret. She recognized me."

"It won't do her any good," the housekeeper said—but by now I'd realized she wasn't a

housekeeper. P. Philip Barnard had called her Margaret. He had a wife named Margaret. "Just dump them far away from here, and make sure the gas tank explodes. We don't want a coroner finding traces. Tomorrow I'll convince Aunt Cora that she heard about the accident on the radio and dreamed the whole visit. It won't be hard. I gave her a pretty good dose, too. Just get the girl in the car. I'll take Aunt Cora inside and then give you a hand with the professor. She looks heavy."

He was already obeying her. He grabbed me again, heaved me over his shoulder, and started carrying me across the lawn. Strong guy, I thought. My head and arms were dangling upside down over his back, the only thing I could see was a whizzing mass of green, my mind was spinning in and out of focus wildly, but I could still give credit where credit was due. P. Philip Barnard must have a massive chest and excessive biceps, just like the heroes in Susan's novels. And he was married, so that made him a hidden, secret, forbidden object for her loves and lusts and passions. He probably wouldn't have much trouble getting a dreamy, romantic girl like Susan to fall for him. And he certainly wouldn't have any

trouble hitting her over the head and tossing her in a swimming pool, or strangling Anita Cox and stringing her up from a ceiling beam. Or pushing a car off an overpass to cover up his latest two murders.

That last image was potent enough to make its way through the swirling thoughts in my brain. Gotta do something, I thought, straining for coherence. I'm a black belt—oughtta be able to do something. I made myself stop gazing at the grass, pleasant as it was, and took a good gaze at P. Philip Barnard's back. Hanging upside down over your opponent's back isn't a particularly good position for an attack, but I thought I could reach his kidney. Could I muster up a punch? Somehow, I'd have to—and I'd better do it now, before I passed out completely. I took the deepest breath I could manage, concentrated as hard as I could, succeeded in reducing the fog in my brain to a mere mist, made a fist, lifted my arm up over my head, aimed for P. Philip Barnard's kidney, swung my arm down, and connected.

All things considered, it must have been a pretty good punch. P. Philip Barnard gasped in pain, arched his body backwards, and dropped me. So now I was lying on my back on

the grass, much too weak to think about getting up—also not an ideal position for an attack, but at least I could reach his ankles. I called up a mental image of a car exploding with Professor Woodhouse and me inside, felt suitably motivated, and made myself roll toward the stunned, panting lawyer. I put every bit of concentration I had left into getting my arms around his ankles, then tightened my grip. He swore, tottered, fell flat on his face. I heard a scream and hoped it was his, but I couldn't be sure—for all I knew, it could be mine. Another scream, and this one definitely wasn't coming from either one of us. It was too far away. A horrible image flashed into what was left of my mind—that bitch Margaret, hurting poor, helpless Professor Woodhouse. I had to finish this guy off and get back to her.

With a fresh spurt of strength, I squeezed his ankles more tightly, pushed my face against his pants leg, found some skin, sank in my teeth. He yelped in agony and tried to roll onto his back, but I wouldn't let him. Then he had curled around on the ground and was trying to pry my arms away from his ankles, my teeth out of his leg. I squeezed my eyes shut, gripped him more fiercely, bit down harder. I

don't know just what I was hoping to accomplish—to puncture a vein, maybe, and make him bleed to death. I certainly hope I wasn't planning to eat him.

I don't know how long we struggled like that, or how long it would have taken him to realize that he'd make more of an impression by punching me in the face than by tugging at my arms. The next things I remember were the muffled sounds of a car pulling up, a door slamming, feet running. And then, miraculously, Miss Woodhouse's voice.

"On your feet, Barnard," she said sharply. "Let her go."

But he wasn't the one who had to let go, and getting on his feet wasn't something he could manage just then. I heard him swear and felt him stop struggling, but at the moment these didn't seem like adequate reasons for removing my teeth from his leg. I clamped down again, and he bellowed with pain.

"Damn it!" he cried. "Get her off me!"

"It's all right, Harriet," Miss Woodhouse said. "I have a gun. You can let him up."

Perfectly reasonable advice, of course, but I was pretty far gone, and my mind had room for just one idea—bite the lawyer. I didn't even open my eyes.

Miss Woodhouse was losing patience.

"For heaven's sake, Harriet," she said. "What's wrong with you? And where's Mother? When I saw your note, I—oh, there you are, Mother. Are you all right?"

"Of course I'm all right," Professor Woodhouse said, and her voice sounded just as crisp as it always does. "But *what* is the matter with Harriet? Harriet! Get up this instant! Is this any way for a lady to behave?"

Drunk, drugged, or sober, I could never disobey Professor Woodhouse. Her words made it through the haze, and I let go. By the time I'd worked my eyelids to a halfway up position, P. Philip Barnard was struggling to his feet, starting to reach for something inside his coat. Miss Woodhouse flattened him with one swift kick that left his nose as bloody as his ankle, then looked at her mother and me with open astonishment.

"I called the police," she said. "I thought they'd beat me here, but I see they're taking their time. What on earth happened, Mother?"

"I hardly know," Professor Woodhouse said, looking uncharacteristically baffled. "I was having a chat with Cora Elizabeth Penhurst, and Harriet was giggling and behaving badly. Then I must have dozed

off. Terribly rude—I do hope Cora will forgive me. And then I was dreaming that I was with the Spartans, at Thermopylae, being attacked by a Persian with exceptionally bad breath. I defended myself quite ably, as I recall, and awoke feeling refreshed and invigorated." She shrugged. "But I *cannot* explain the scene that greeted me when I opened my eyes. Cora was no longer there, and that housekeeper of hers was lying on the ground with a bloody nose, quite unconscious. I trust you summoned an ambulance as well as the police, Iphigenia. She may require medical attention."

She required, in fact, hospitalization. Professor Woodhouse had left her with a broken nose and two cracked ribs and a mild concussion. If the professor really *had* been at Thermopylae, the Spartans might have had a chance. I stayed at the hospital for a few hours, too, until the doctors were sure that the drug Margaret Barnard had put in my sherry had worn off completely. It was the same kind of drug, I learned later, that she'd used to keep little Billy Cronin quiet when she and her husband had him hidden in their summer home in Ocean City. It always helps to have a physi-

cian in the family if you're planning a kidnapping. As for Professor Woodhouse, she refused to go to the hospital at all, and the paramedic who tried to get close enough to examine her had to admit that there was probably no need. She was fine. All she'd needed was a ten minute nap, and she'd recovered from the drug completely. I try to tell myself it was because she hadn't had as much sherry as I did. But I don't think that's the real reason.

Anyway, we were both lucky. P. Philip Barnard had seen Miss Woodhouse at the daycare center that morning, had asked a cop about her, had found out who I really was. Then, when his wife called him at his office to say that Professor Minerva Woodhouse and Miss Harriet Russo had come by to see his aunt, he'd panicked. He figured that we were starting to make the connections he hadn't wanted anyone to make. He'd told his wife to drug us, that he'd come right over to get rid of us. Luckily, by that time Miss Woodhouse had talked her ex-fiancé into letting her see the apartment Susan O'Reilly and Anita Cox had shared. She'd spotted one of those bookplates in another romance novel and seen that Susan's middle name was Penhurst—and since she'd already

known that P. Philip Barnard's first name was Penhurst, too, she started making some connections of her own. She came home, and—well, you know the rest.

Or most of it. The three of us finally got a chance to put all the pieces together over supper that night. Miss Woodhouse made cold chicken sandwiches and opened up a bottle of Professor Woodhouse's olive and onion marinade, and we settled down in front of the television to enjoy a cosy meal.

"You should have told me about the bookplate, Harriet," Miss Woodhouse said reprovingly. "Penhurst and O'Reilly don't exactly sound like names that naturally go together."

I nodded in apology, not daring to point out that Miss Woodhouse hadn't shown much interest in hearing anything I had to say yesterday. "So Susan O'Reilly was Cora Elizabeth Penhurst's granddaughter?"

"That is correct," Professor Woodhouse said. *Wheel of Fortune* had just ended, so she picked up the remote and found *Green Acres*. "As I told you, Cora could be an extremely nasty old woman. When her only daughter defied her by marrying an Irish jazz musician, Cora disowned her and refused to have anything further to do with the couple—or with



the daughter they eventually produced. I doubt that young Susan ever met her grandmother, or understood the true origin of her middle name. Cora's daughter was probably just as proud, in her own way, as her mother. And I hope, dear Harriet, that you will understand why I felt constrained this afternoon to refer to your religion and your national origin in such a disrespectful way. I was pretending sympathy with Cora's outdated and thoroughly unjustified views, in hopes of drawing her out."

"I understand," I said warmly, and meant it. "And then Susan's parents were killed in that car accident six months ago, and Cora Penhurst felt guilty. So she decided to make amends by naming Susan as her heir after all."

Miss Woodhouse passed me the marinade and nodded. "And that meant substantially disinheriting her nephew and lawyer, Penhurst Philip Barnard. An awkward decision, since he'd already lost a good bit of Susan's inheritance through gambling and bad investments. He had to get rid of her, in a way that would raise no suspicions and leave the old lady more than ever convinced that she'd been right to despise her daughter and granddaughter. He must have done a fair

amount of research on Susan, to find out about her connection with the Cronins and her penchant for forbidden romances. After that, it was all fairly easy—play up to the Cronins, meet Susan through them, seduce her, make her promise to keep the affair secret to protect his marriage, arrange a rendezvous while she was babysitting at the Cronin house." She sighed. "And then kill her, and take little Billy to make it look like a kidnapping and disguise the real motive for the murder. No one ever asked who would have a reason to kill Susan—it never occurred to the police to wonder if she might be an heiress. Everyone assumed that she was simply an incidental victim in a kidnapping, possibly a conspirator."

"Especially," Professor Woodhouse put in severely, "since people are so eager to regard daycare centers with suspicion, to see the people who work there as sinister figures prone to abuse and neglect and all manner of evil. You yourself, Iphigenia, display this same reprehensible tendency. Like so many young women of your generation, you pretend to liberality and sisterly feeling, but you are utterly intolerant of women whose lives differ in any respect from your own. Consequently, you were

blinded by contempt and failed to see that this entire kidnapping was a mere sideshow, a means to mask a murder."

"I know," Miss Woodhouse said, spearing an olive with her fork dejectedly. "I was wrong. Thank you for pointing it out."

"Well, at least Cherry's Children's Center has been completely vindicated," I said, eager to ease her misery. "I'm sure Cherry will get all her old students back. And little Billy Cronin is safe and sound, back home with his parents." A horrible thought came to me. "What were the Barnards planning to do with Billy? What would have happened to him if Anita hadn't forced the issue by confronting Barnard and giving him a reason to return Billy to the center? Would they have killed him?"

"Possibly," Miss Woodhouse said, shrugging. "Neither of the Barnards is talking much, so we may never know for sure. My guess is that they were waiting to see how things developed. They wanted the suspicion for the kidnapping to fall on someone else, and the people at the daycare center were the most obvious targets. If the Barnards could build that suspicion by having Billy show up alive somewhere, fine. If they decided it would be better to have his body found on Cherry

Benson's doorstep, they would have done that. I don't think they were eager to commit a second murder. But as Anita Cox found out, they wouldn't hesitate to do it if they thought it was necessary." She looked over at her mother, and her eyes were suddenly misty. "They didn't hesitate about deciding to commit a third murder, either, or a fourth. I just thank God they didn't get the chance."

Professor Woodhouse snarled at her and set to work on her nearly-completed Keith Richards mosaic. "I, too, thank God," she said, "since it is customary to do so on such occasions. You needn't think, however, that I thank *you*, you nasty girl. Had you thought just a bit more clearly and had been just a bit more open to the insights Harriet was ready to offer you, you might have spared us a most tiresome ordeal. As it was, you arrived just after the nick of time. Harriet and I were handling matters quite competently on our own. Your help was tardy and ultimately superfluous."

"That's not fair," I began to protest, but Miss Woodhouse passed me another sandwich and waved me off.

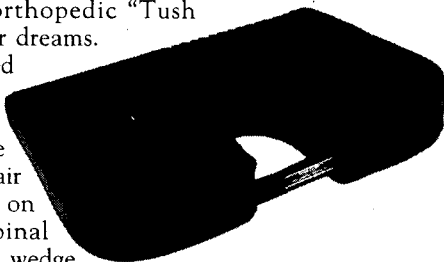
"Mother is quite right," she said, smiling. "As always."

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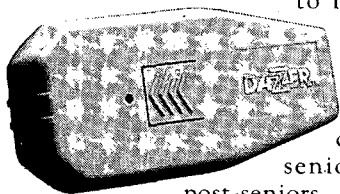
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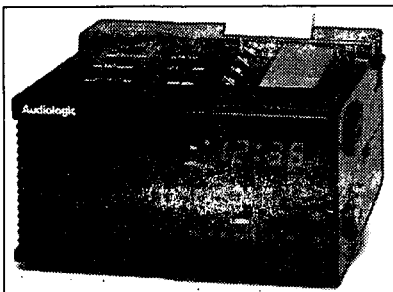
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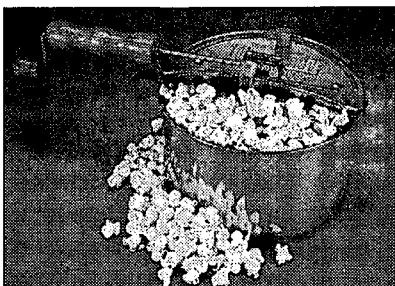
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# UNSOLVED

by  
*Robert Kesling*

*Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?*

*The answer will appear in the Mid-December issue.*

For over a century the Golden Gulf was domineered by two rival bands of pirates: the Brotherhood of Buccaneers and the Fellowship of Freebooters. Then, harried by navies of America and Europe, the pirates reached a truce and deposited their combined enormous booty on Skeleton Island, the exact location of which was known only to the Supreme Commander of each band. Now, with only six ships left (three in each band) and with mounting risks, the evil pirates agree to converge on Skeleton Island for the last time, there to divide their ill-gotten treasures of gold, silver, and gems. Each ship plans thereafter to sail to some faraway uncharted refuge, where the captain and crew can settle in safe retirement.

Nevertheless, greed still fills their black souls, and members of each band have secretly agreed to coldly murder those of the other at the final conclave *if* they have superior numbers; otherwise, the plunder is sufficient to divide equally among them.

- (1) The ships of the Brotherhood of Buccaneers are the *Evil*, the one under Captain Ned, and the one with gray sails. Ships of the Fellowship of Freebooters are the *Anger*, the one under Captain Karl, and the one with golden sails.
- (2) The pirate captains known as "Rat," "Undertaker," and "Viti-riol" belong to one band, and those known as "Scar," "Tusk," and "Weasel" belong to the other.
- (3) The ships *Blood*, *Carnage*, and *Death* include the one under Captain Paul, the one captained by "Undertaker," and the one with black sails.
- (4) "Scar," Captain Louie, and the captain of the *Fate* (who are not all in the same band) are armed with the hook, musket, and cutlass (in one order or another).

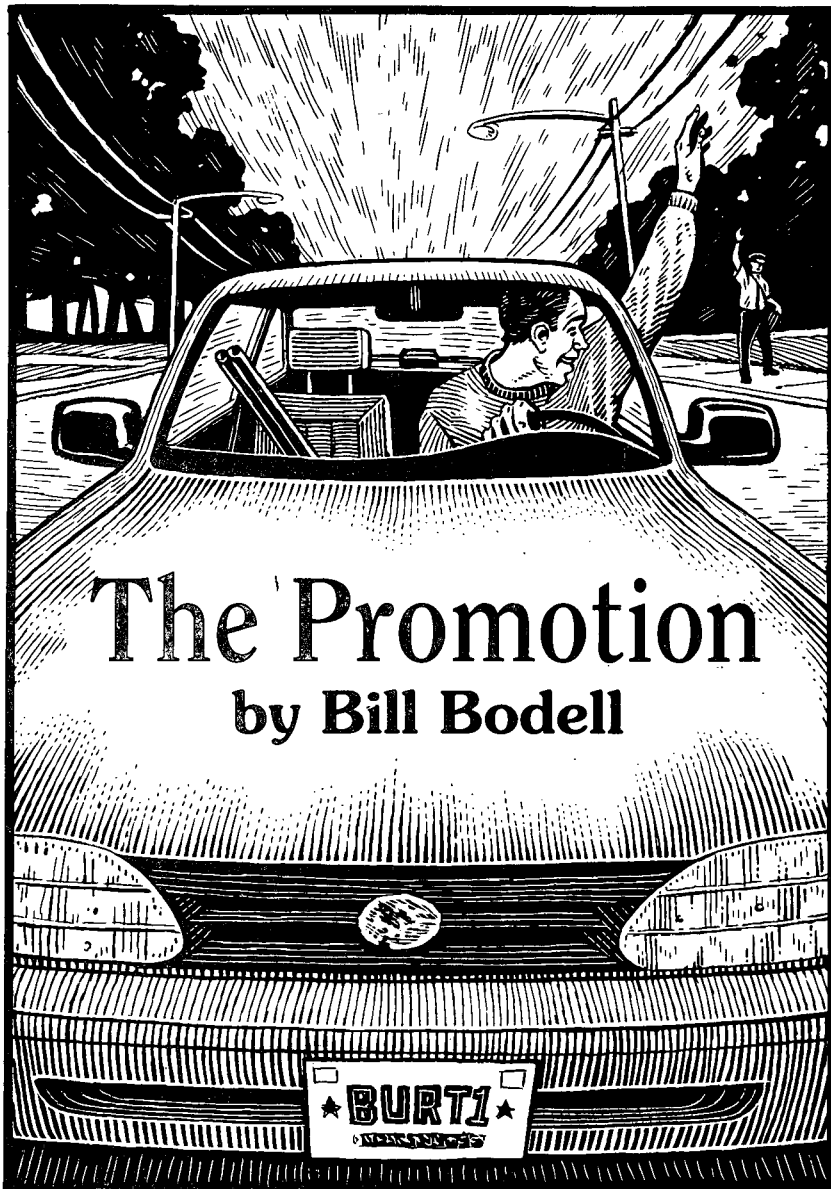
- (5) The captain of the *Death* (who is not Supreme Commander of his band) and the captain of the ship with blue sails are not in the same band as Captain Mack and the pirate with the saber.
- (6) "Tusk," the captain flying yellow sails, and the one armed with the cutlass are members of the same band. The captain of the *Carnage* (who is not known as "Rat") belongs to the rival band.
- (7) The captains of the *Fate* and the ship with gray sails are not "Tusk" or the pirate with the musket; none of the four is Supreme Commander of his band.
- (8) The pirates armed with dirk and pistol belong to the Brotherhood of Buccaneers.
- (9) During a hurricane, the ships become scattered. Four land at Skeleton Island: the *Blood*, the one with blue sails, the ship under Captain Oliver, and the one under "Weasel." Still the Supreme Commanders of the two rival bands have not appeared, and only they know the location of the treasure. As they wait nervously, one captain sharpens his saber and another fingers his dirk.
- (10) Suddenly around the point of the island looms the vessel with the red sails—as red as the sands of Skeleton Island are soon to become.

*Which pirate band ended up with the treasure?*

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See page 136 for the solution to the November puzzle.

FICTION



# The Promotion

by Bill Bodell



**P**ressing the garage door closed, Burt Bromley backed from his driveway and spun the steering wheel to the left.

Then he remembered there would be no more Mondays; no more visits to the loyal clients who had peopled his other world the past twenty-two years.

Low on the horizon, the Saturday morning sun shone through the shedding oak trees, dappling his station wagon with multihued leaves and patches of shade.

"I hate autumn," Burt said as he headed for town instead of the interstate highway. "Death is all around me. One good breeze and the limbs will be bare.

"Winter gives you more time to concentrate on the family." This was the other voice of Burt, the problem solver. "Where would Wooded Glens' Christmas Festival and the Ice Pageant be if it weren't for you?"

Burt reflected upon the two lives he led. The territory's favorite salesman and the local, part-time man about town. Five days of one, two of the other.

"Zach Pangloss down at the paper calls me the inventor of one-man dialogue." Burt noted the apt oxymoron. The drive between business calls allowed time to review life's real or imagined problems, followed by answers that maintained his optimism in a collapsing world. Now, thanks to the promotion, all but the habit of talking to himself was a thing of the past.

Burt checked the shotgun on the seat beside him. Both barrels were empty; the safety catch on. The nearly full box of shells was on the floor.

"God, I'd hate becoming a nine to fiver. Tried telling Dolan last night that I can't be replaced by a fax machine. Why couldn't he leave well enough alone?

"So now you're Dolan Industries' sales manager. Everyone in Wooded Glens is glad to hear you're off the road.

"To hell with Dolan," Burt muttered. "Rather think what I'll say to Gus."

Well manicured hedges and spacious lawns flanked the winding street through the west side of town. Joe Lukas approached in his old MG, stopping at each round metal tube to insert the morning edition of the *Glens Gazette*.

Waving, Burt pulled to the opposite curb on the trafficless pavement. "What's this morning's boring headline?"

"Congratulations, Mr. Bromley." Joe held up the front page. *Hunting Season Starts*. "Looks like you and Gus are ready for some action."

"Thanks for the peek." Burt drove on. Last night's *Homecoming Game Tonight* reminded him of Burt, Jr., and past football seasons. How little time they had had together after the lad went off to college.

Burt relived the Awards Night Banquet when his son, All-Conference quarterback three straight seasons, accepted the Most Valuable Player plaque.

"I couldn't have done it without your support, Dad." Burt still felt his son's powerful arms hugging him. Wiping the tear from his eye that evening, he'd laughed at his daughter's reaction.

Beautiful, snobbish Linda. "I forgive you for being an older brother," she said, standing on tiptoes to kiss young Burt's cheek. "And I forgive you for all the times you pulled my ponytail."

When the boy's picture made the *Gazette's* front page, Burt bought twenty-five copies, then dashed to the newspaper office for the eight by ten glossy, which he promptly framed.

Burt had gotten away for the college homecoming game during his son's freshman year. Beyond his wildest expectations, Burt, Jr., had become the starting quarterback when a knee injury knocked out the senior starter.

Only after arriving on campus did he discover his son would not dress for the game.

"Mono, Dad." The young man's explanation was brief and to the point. "I tried to call but . . ."

"It's good to see you, lad, whether you're suited up or not." Burt put his arm around his broad shoulders, giving only a moment's thought to the canceled appointment with Harry Burmeister, the potential new account. "Let's go talk to your coach. Maybe he can find room for a sick kid and a weary old man to sit together."

"You're still the world's greatest salesman, Dad." Coach Meyers had placed the father and son next to his defensive assistant, where they had a perfect view.

The following year, when Linda was elected high school Homecoming Queen, he and Brenda repeated the heady process and accepted the envious compliments of their friends and acquaintances.

Around that time, in mid-July, Burt first noticed his daughter's emergence into womanhood. Linda came in from sunbathing on

the patio clad in a bikini. His glance followed as she crossed the room. On future occasions, Burt looked away, feeling guilty, noting only how little she resembled her mother at fifteen.

It was no wonder Blackmoor College, her first choice, offered a scholarship. Nor was it unexpected when her first real romance blossomed on campus, much to Brenda's dismay.

"Mom has a real bad cold. Can hardly talk," Burt lied when Linda called home in tears to tell of failing grades and disillusionment. "First loves can be tragic, sweetheart. Maybe he wasn't the right guy after all. Come on home for now. I'll see what I can arrange about your starting fresh next semester."

The college dean proved as vulnerable as one of Burt's clients.

"I understand, Mr. Bromley," he said. "Linda's guidance counselor will advise her that the scholarship won't be jeopardized."

"Love, sweet love," Burt said aloud as he continued down the street. "Hadn't it taken persistence to win over the once reluctant Brenda?"

Brenda. Approaching Veteran's Park at the crest of the hill, Burt pulled to the curb again and looked across the field at the aging monument. There, at its base, thirty years before, he'd made his first proposal.

"I love you truly, Brenda Dickens," he said, striking the pose of the bronzed local hero. "When you're old enough, I shall thee wed."

"Sit down before someone sees you and hears you talking funny," she protested. "I'm fifteen, ugly, skinny, and flat-chested. Who would want me?"

"I would," said Burt. "It is written in the stars. And I shall be faithful forever."

It was a pledge Burt kept, despite the many temptations offered by life on the road.

Three years after Burt's teenaged, melodramatic proposal, Brenda's braces were removed, her hairstyle changed, and her bosom flowered. Acceding to Burt's persistence, she rewarded his loyalty by becoming his steady girl.

"Those pesky sparks are gone from your kisses," he teased. "I think your braces attracted electricity."

"I still think you're silly."

"Crazy is what Ma calls me. She's convinced I'm crazy."

"Because you like me?"

"Calls me Pollyanna. Ma says I'm also a pragmatist. She says I think there's a solution for every problem."

Their eventual marriage met with Ma's approval. Thus blessed by God and Ma Bromley, they eased into a comfortable upper middle class union.

Ma. Burt thought next of her, too frail and weak now to live alone, and of his lost den that had reverted to a bedroom.

When Ma got on Brenda's nerves, as she often did, Burt resorted to humor.

"Behave yourself, Ma," he'd say, "or it's off to bed without any supper."

"Crazy." The smile stretched across the bone-thin face failed to mask the glint in her eyes. "You don't fool me. You're crazy as a loon. Wouldn't live with you one more minute if I had any other choice."

Later, when they were alone, Burt hugged and kissed Brenda, thanking her again for her marvelous patience. She always smiled and squeezed his arm.

"Time to move along." Burt shifted his gaze and thoughts from the monument and the past, checked the rear view mirror, and pulled from the curb. Gus would wait. Years on the road taught him that careful planning was more efficient than impulsive actions.

A car horn sounded behind him.

"Daydreaming again." Burt turned left toward town. At the Village Diner, he parked and walked inside.

"Darned if it ain't Hometown-Boy-Makes-Good," said Danny Mozden. "Congratulations on your big promotion."

"A classic example of the Peter Principle, Danny. Every successful man rises to his level of incompetence."

"I hear Dolan's honorin' you with a big shindig tonight at the country club."

"Ooze some of that muddy java into a cup." Burt hung his hunting jacket on the nearby hook.

"Comin' right up. Me and the missus seen Dolan and your wife talking head to head last week," said Danny. "They musta been plannin' somethin' special."

The coffee burned Burt's tongue, numbing his taste buds to the bitter brew.

"I hear young Burt's home from college. Came down with mono."

Burt thought about his son's freshman activities. "Never got to see him play last season." Burt rattled the spoon inside his empty cup.

"Wanna refill?" Danny asked.

Burt tore open two sugar bags, spilling one. "Gus, whatever happened to regular sugar bowls?"

"Food inspectors said they ain't sanitary. Folks can't keep the lid on nothin'."

"It's hard to do, all right." His thoughts drifted elsewhere.

"Hey, Burt. Tryin' to wear a hole in the bottom of the cup?"

"Huh?"

"You been stirrin' it five minutes now. Did I catch you dreamin'?"

"Dreams are what life is all about, Danny boy. A man without dreams is a man without anything."

"Long as I known ya, ya always got an answer."

"Comes with the territory."

"And with old age. Bein' an expectant grandfather is makin' you forgetful. If your Linda's husband is near as handsome as she is beautiful, they'll sure have one perfect kid."

"My perfect world was out on the road." Burt sipped his coffee, unaware of the story Brenda had concocted to explain their daughter's broken romance and subsequent pregnancy. "Dolan has turned me into a paper shuffler."

"Cheer up, Burt," said Danny. "You'll be home when the baby comes. When's Linda due?"

"Doc said January."

"Your missus and your ma gettin' on okay?"

"They aren't fighting any more, thank God."

"Easier on Brenda, right?"

"With young Burt and Linda home, she gets out two nights a week now."

"See her car in Le Parisien's parkin' lot now and then. Never eat there ourselves." Danny's eyes brightened. "Say, how's about you and Brenda tryin' my Tuesday night special? On the house."

Burt laughed. "Impossible, I guarantee you."

"Better for Brenda now that you're home," Danny reflected. "Seen you both last weekend. Anniversary?"

"A movie and dinner." Burt looked at his watch. Time to see Gus. "We have an arrangement. I pick the movies. Brenda gets to criticize my choices."

"You're a patient man, Burt. I'll give you that."

"I try to please."

Shifting on the stool, Burt recalled that evening. The film had not set well with Brenda. He screened with care what they saw at

the Bijou. Despite his efforts, an occasional film pushed its R rating to the limit.

"Faster, Eric, faster," groaned the stereophonic voice on the wide screen. The camera pulled back. The rider wasn't Lady Godiva nor was Eric a horse.

"Filth." Brenda rose from her seat. "I'll be in the lobby whenever you're ready."

Burt stayed on a few minutes, annoyed at her public display of prissiness. When he pushed open the double doors at the top of the aisle, Brenda was standing in the far corner of the lobby.

"Sorry, the reviews didn't mention that scene." His comforting arm was thrust aside. "Want to go on to the restaurant?"

"I have no appetite after that display. Take me home."

"Wonder if she's like this with other people?" Burt asked himself as he followed her to the car and opened the passenger door. Through force of habit created on the road, he checked out the back seat before getting in. Putting the key in his door, he realized there was a positive side to Brenda's response.

"Not a total loss." Burt started the engine. "We saved twenty bucks on a meal you wouldn't have eaten."

In their driveway, the silence was shattered as the door went up. The noise from the television set blasted through the garage. Ma's program was ending. Burt gathered her things, then helped the old lady upstairs to bed. Farther down the hall, Brenda was talking with young Burt.

Later, in their bedroom, she told him that, in their son's words, the visiting Linda was zonked out for the evening.

"And Burt's off to bed also?"

"He's been feeling tired lately."

Burt went into their private bathroom, showered, and dried his hair as he came out.

"Put something on," said Brenda.

"The bedroom door's locked. Who's going to peek?"

"Nevertheless."

They watched the end of a black and white movie on their color television.

"They don't make them like that any more."

"You're right." Burt yawned. He watched as Brenda picked up her nightgown and robe, heard the bathroom door close, the lock snap in place.

Later, at the sound of the closing medicine cabinet, Burt propped himself up on one elbow, his eyes on the door. In his fantasy, Brenda would open it slowly, the light silhouetting her trim naked body. Then she would come to him in their bed, loving him as in the movie.

The door opened. Burt caught one brief glimpse of the familiar floor length garment before the light went off, then heard her remove the robe that had taken her, unseen, the ten steps from the door to the edge of their bed.

She pulled back the covers and got in. Burt lay there in anticipation. His thoughts drifted to his daughter, his son, his mother, even to his boss. He reasoned that Brenda was making sure the family was asleep.

The household settled. Burt felt her move. Brenda made love to him like she cleaned the house: quietly, quickly, and efficiently.

Burt pushed the experience from his mind by running his finger around the edge of his empty cup.

"One more refill?" Danny stood across the counter, coffeepot in hand.

"Nope. It's time to get on with it." Burt spun around on his diner stool, eyes refocused on his hanging hunting jacket.

At the station wagon, Burt noticed the left rear door unlocked, the gun and shells left unprotected. "Stupid thing to do," he mumbled. "Some kid could have gotten hurt."

Two blocks farther down Main, he stopped again and got out, checking to make sure he was parked properly. This time he remembered the back seat items, took them along and mounted the high curb.

"Getting old," he muttered. "Maybe that's why Dolan wouldn't change his mind last night." Burt marveled at his boss's inspired decision. "While Burt Bromley was out beating the bushes, Ed Dolan was making out big in his million dollar bachelor pad outside of town. Or was until the novelty wore off."

Reaching the top stone step, he pulled open the door, trudged down the hallway, turned left, and entered the room. The rotund, sleepy-eyed man looked up.

"Oh, Burt," he said. "It's you."

"Had a long night, Gus?"

"Naw, real quiet. How's the family taking the promotion from Dolan?"



Burt laid his burden on the counter and, before answering, gave each of them one more thought.

Young Burt, out of college, dying from AIDS; unmarried, pregnant Linda, determined to bring her cocaine-addicted fetus to birth; his cancer-ridden mother, wasting away in front of his eyes; Brenda and Ed Dolan and the twice a week, not so secret meetings they'd carried on for the past half year.

And now, wanting out of the affair, Dolan had brought Burt home to reap the reward he so richly deserved. Or so Dolan's announcement would read in the Sunday Business Section.

Dolan had manipulated him again. By returning Brenda, whose infidelity further tarnished the family image Burt had worked so hard to create, Dolan's promotion forced Burt to face the realities he'd repressed on the road.

"You scare me, old buddy." Gus rubbed sleep from his eyes. "I forgot it was the hunting season. Problem with the gun?"

"Works fine." Burt looked at the counter, then stared at the dust-streaked window. "Only problems and solutions."

"About Dolan and the family?" the night sergeant repeated.

"Arrest me, Gus." Burt's voice echoed softly in the stark police station. "I've killed them all."

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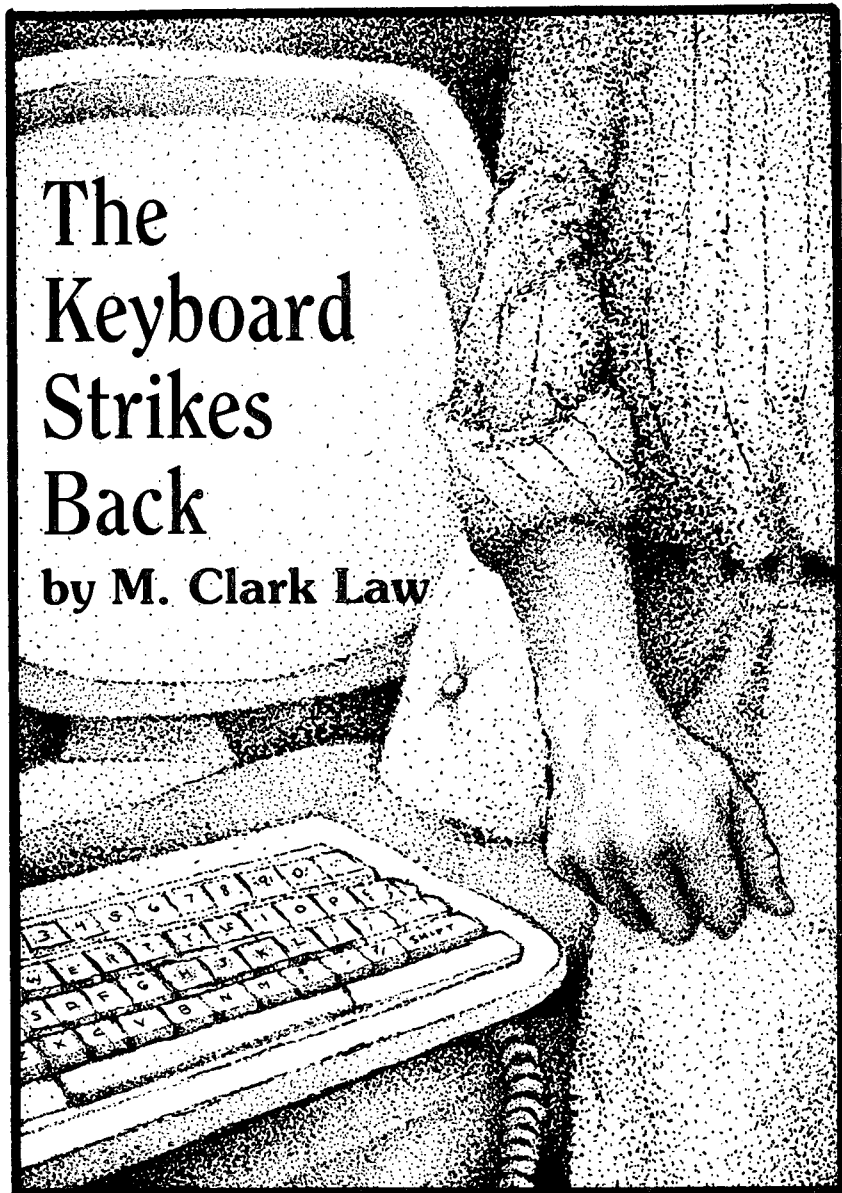
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FICTION

# The Keyboard Strikes Back

by M. Clark Law



*Illustration by Mark Penta*

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**“I** am calling you, ou ou ou, ouuuuu.” Pavarotti, meet your match. Cleansed of the grime and oozing well-being, I stepped from the shower to find my plaintive calling had reached an unexpected party.

“Ian, Ian, yoohoo, Ian, are you there?”

Grabbing a towel, I managed to sarong myself a nanosecond before the yoohooer appeared at the bedroom door.

“Oh, sorry, the patio door was open. . . . I knocked on the screen but you didn’t answer, and I thought you were watching TV so I came in. . . . Hate to bother you, but I have a pie in the oven and the door is locked, though I’m sure Stan is home and I can’t remember whether Lyle still has a key to the house and . . .”

“Hold on.” Words erupt from Laura’s mouth like water from a broken hydrant. You take control or drown in the outburst. “Laura, if you’ll kindly withdraw for a minute, I’ll get some clothes on.”

She stood looking at me, A thin stream of perspiration meandered down a plump cheek toward the corner of her pink lipsticked mouth, which was opening for another verbal barrage.

“Out,” I commanded and started removing the towel.

Laura is the next door neighbor, a round little woman who has always reminded me of a dumpling. Though childless, she exudes grandmotherly concern and tolerance. Laura and Stan Faxton built their retirement home on the five acres next to us six or seven years before my wife died. We’d all been neighborly, the occasional visit for a drink, the keeping an eye on each other’s property when the owner was away, that sort of thing. Although the two had been pillars of support and kindness during my wife’s illness, there had never been any bounding in and out of each other’s houses unannounced. Had things changed since my departure?

Perhaps I had better explain. Three years ago, after finally coming to terms with my grief, I decided to take early retirement and reacquaint myself with my New England origins and the family homestead that my sister and I had inherited. I sold the California house to my only offspring, Lyle, and meandered eastward.

Now I was temporarily back, house and pet sitting while Lyle and his bride of five years cavorted through Europe on a long-delayed honeymoon. Since the kids had left, I’d seen the Faxtons only a few times—cocktails at their house my sec-

ond evening alone, a morning's round of golf with Stan at the local nine-hole course, a call from Dumpling asking if she could drop over with a loaf of homemade bread.

Despite her uncharacteristic intrusion, I didn't appreciate what a stew Dumpling was in until, hastily attired, I joined her in the living room. Her hands, first one, then the other, adjusted the rhinestone-studded glasses, assured themselves that the earrings were in place, smoothed the pink pants suit jacket, patted the side of the nose with a tissue.

"Now, what's this about being locked out?"

"Yes. I went up the lane to visit with Doris for a minute, and when I got back, the house was locked and I couldn't get in. Stan's truck is there, but he didn't answer when I knocked and hollered. Last time we went away, we left a key with Lyle. I don't know whether Stan took it back or . . . I have a pie in the oven, apple, that's Stan's favorite. It'll be burned to a crisp or run all over the oven. Something is wrong, I feel it."

A burnt pie is not to be laughed at, but I hardly thought it worthy of such anguish. Her premonition of trouble I discounted, figuring Stan had turned down his hearing

aid and hadn't heard her, or that he'd gone out for his daily walk.

"If Lyle has a key, I haven't a clue where it might be. Let's go over to your place and see if we can find a way in."

We set off through the oak grove that screened and separated the two houses. Parched leaves crackled underfoot as Dumpling hustled and huffed to keep up with me.

Sure enough, there was Stan's small pickup in the oval drive leading to the detached garage. The front door of the house was locked as was the sliding door and screen that opened onto the patio from the dining area in the rear. To the left of the patio was an ell that contained a second slider going into Stan's den. That door was also locked, although the screen was partly open. I peered through the glass but saw no sign of Stan, nor was there any response to my banging and yelling.

It was an oven-hot Sacramento Valley day, and all who could afford it had their air conditioners diligently humming. Unlikely any windows would be open, but when we circuited the house a second time, Dumpling noticed that the small sliding window in one of the bathrooms was open an inch.

The window sat high on the wall. Dumpling and I wrestled the picnic table under it. Prodded by her anxiety, I climbed onto the table, pried out the screen, pushed the window open as far as it would go, and wriggled my torso through it. By contortions unbefitting my age I managed to handclimb down the far side of the tub/shower enclosure which the window overlooked and, while in an upside down position, pull my feet through the window and walk them down the window wall until at last, with neck and limbs still inexplicably intact, I stood upright in the tub.

The nervous twittering of Dumpling outside the window faded as I made my way into the floral-papered hallway and, feeling like a cat burglar, proceeded to the even more busily papered living room. Bloody hell.

"And that literally was what it was," I told my sister Lee during my phone call back east several hours later. "There lay poor old Stan, prone, eyes open, bloodsmeared head on the hearth. The white painted brick pseudofireplace was splattered with red, as was a corner of the computer keyboard, which rested on the floor beside him. One of the scalloped-shaded lamps had been

knocked to the floor, the flower-cushioned rocking chair upended. Country decor run amok."

"How awful for Dumpling," Lee sympathized.

"Worse for Stan," I said.

"Well, of course, but what do they think happened?"

"The police theorize," I took a liberal sip of Dewar's scotch and water before continuing, "that he was conked with the keyboard. It either knocked him out or dazed him. There was a bad gash on his forehead. Apparently he fell against the chair, which fell over upsetting the lamp. He landed backside down, and his head smashed against the hearth."

"Robbery?"

"No signs of it that I could see," I replied.

"How did they get along, the Faxtons, I mean? Is it possible they had a fight and she got carried away?" My divorced sister, who had stoically put up with a neurotic fathead for twenty-odd years until he decided he'd be happier elsewhere, did not credit other women with her idiotic forbearance.

"I doubt it. From what I've seen, they got along fine. Stan was quiet, easygoing, and I suspect the most violent thing Laura has ever done is split an infinitive. She might talk you



to death, but I can't imagine physical violence."

We caught up on Lee's bathroom renovation at the old family farmhouse she called home and progress on the house I was building on my share of the twenty acres. Our construction palaver was cut short by the front door buzzer, punctuated by a token woof from Paws, my son's oversized lollygagging mutt. Paws' inertia assured me that whoever it was had been welcomed here at least once previously. He bestirred himself to a full bark only with complete strangers.

The visitor was Jack, an old school chum of my son's and now a deputy sheriff, detective division. "Boy, what a day. We just finished. If you offered me a nice cold beer, I just might be able to make it home before I melt."

He followed me into the kitchen, and while I extracted a can of beer from the fridge, he doused his head with cold water at the sink, then rubbed his red hair and freckled face with a couple of paper towels. He rolled the cold can across his forehead before taking a swig.

"How anyone can have the energy to commit mayhem on a scorcher like today is beyond me." He sank onto a stool and leaned both elbows on the

counter that divided kitchen and dining area.

"What did you find? Was anything missing?"

"Doesn't seem so," Jack said. "Mrs. Faxon was pretty upset, of course, but she thought nothing was gone. Mr. Faxon's stamp collection, which I gather is worth a bundle, was in the drawer of his desk, and she had a couple of pieces of nice jewelry that were in the case on her dresser. The televisions and silver were in place, and there was no sign of ransacking."

"Perhaps he caught someone in the act."

"Act of what? No sign of forced entry and, anyway, he was in the den fiddling with his computer when she left and all the doors were locked." He took another gulp of beer and continued. "Funny thing, that. She said she told him she'd be gone only a short time. Why would he have locked the door, for heaven's sake? The only times we lock our doors are when the wife and I are both gone and when we go to bed at night."

"They tell me there have been several robberies around here lately, and he probably figured he couldn't hear if someone came in. Furthermore, they are getting on in years, you know, and people tend to feel more vulnerable as

they get older." Although the Faxtons had several years on me, I'd of late found myself being more cautious about locked doors, although I had yet to reach the stage when I locked myself in during the day.

"It doesn't figure." Jack slowly drew circles on the countertop with the beer can. "She swears she left through the slider in the den, slid the door and the screen closed but of course there was no way to lock them from the outside. They hadn't gone out earlier, so the other slider was still locked from last night, as was the front door. Incidentally, the latter is not self-locking, needs a key from the outside or the lever turned from inside."

"But the den slider was locked when Laura and I got there."

"Well, not exactly. The door itself wasn't locked, but the pipe they used to prevent its being forced was in place in the bottom gutter or whatever you call that thing they slide on," Jack said.

"What about the keys to the front door?"

"His were in his pocket, and hers were on the dresser in the bedroom. That's another reason I dropped by here. Mrs. Faxton said the only other key to the house was one they had given Lyle when they went to Hawaii

several months ago. She couldn't remember whether he still had it. If someone got hold of that, it might explain a lot."

I told Jack that Laura had mentioned the key earlier and that I would search around and see if I could find it. He finished his beer and left. I promised to call him at home if I found the key.

After feeding Paws and Gabby, the Siamese, I wandered the house seeking likely places where the key might be stashed. Lyle is well organized, a trait not inherited from my side of the family, and Kate, his wife, is likewise, so there were no drawers containing jumbled messes of old keys, receipts, screwdrivers, and the like. I nosed through neat drawers and cupboards to no avail.

Eventually I returned to the kitchen and put a potato in the oven to bake before tackling the garage. It was a large two-car garage. As in most California houses there was no basement, so the garage served multiple purposes. Housing the Faxton key appeared not to be one of them.

An hour later while rummaging around the kitchen for peppercorns I found the key hanging on a hook in the spice cupboard behind the thyme. The small attached tag was handprinted with the letter *F*.

After an early dinner of grilled pork chop, baked potato, overcooked green beans, and salad I called Jack and told him about the key. He said he'd drop by in the morning to pick it up and make sure it was the right one. I then settled down with a good mystery while Paws and Gabby galumphed around playing tag.

The animals had collapsed in contented exhaustion by the time the phone rang. It was Doris, who had insisted Dump-ling spend the night at her house. She said Laura wanted to see me. Could I come up to her house for a few minutes? My druthers lay elsewhere, but ever the agreeable one, I said I'd be along shortly.

Doris and Chet Chaping's house is at the end of the lane that borders Lyle's property and is hidden from view by a bend in the lane and a small stand of oak. I was about to enter their driveway when a helmeted figure on a motorcycle zoomed down the drive, turned into the lane, missing me by a short foot, and disappeared in a flurry of dust. Whit, their son and erstwhile neighborhood terror, I assumed.

Doris was standing in the doorway of the house and as I approached said, "I'm sorry about that, Ian. He obviously didn't see you."

A ridiculous statement on the face of it. At six two, one hundred ninety-seven pounds, and a bald pate fringed with white, I'm rarely mistaken for a fencepost.

"When did he get the motorcycle?" I asked, more to make conversation than out of real interest.

"Oh, a few months ago," Doris said and motioned me to follow her into the house. "He's had some trouble with cars, you know, and the bike was all he could afford."

Lyle had mentioned to me that Whit had wrecked two cars a while back, one by ramming a power pole, which had resulted in a three-hour blackout for the entire area, the other by contact with a ditch. In both cases the cars had been totaled and Whit barely scratched. His license, much to the relief of the neighbors, had been suspended for several months.

"I take it he has a job, then. Where is he working?"

"He does odd jobs here and there," Doris said vaguely. We arrived in the living room at the same time Chet entered via the kitchen. He started to extend his hand, realized he was wearing his gardening gloves, and withdrew it. "Sorry about that, been cleaning the garage. Have to protect my tools of

trade, ha, ha, ha." I wondered yet again if his patients found his drilling as heavyhanded as his humor.

"Good to see you, Ian. Hell of a thing that happened to Stan. Doris, get the man a beer."

I declined the beer. "Terrible," I agreed. "How is Laura holding up?"

"Seems to be okay. Hasn't said much. Doris took her right to the guest room, and we've hardly seen her since. She didn't want any dinner. Isn't that right, Dor?"

"Said she couldn't eat a thing. Not surprising. What she's been through." Doris shook her head, indicating it was all too much to take in. "There have been a lot of robberies in the area, but no one has been attacked before. It's frightening."

"There seems to be some doubt about its being robbery, but I expect we'll know more in a few days," I said.

"What else could it be?" Chet said. "Seems pretty straightforward. Some dopehead thought he'd rip the place off. Stan caught him at it, they fought, the guy picked up the keyboard from the chair and zapped him. Then he got scared and ran."

"Could be," I said. For all I knew he could be right, though I suspected there was more to it. Any argument at this early

stage would simply be ignorance butting ignorance. I turned to Doris. "You said Laura wanted to see me."

"Yes, she's lying down, but I told her I'd send you in. Just go down the hall, first door on the right."

I found Laura sitting in a chair by the window. She looked faded and old but composed. Her pink outfit provided the only color in the room. Everything else was beige: wall-paper, carpet, cafe curtain, chenille bedspread on the double bed. There was a small walnut veneer dresser, a matching bedside table on which rested a dull brass lamp, and the straightbacked chair on which Dumpling sat. No pictures, no cheer. The room was spotless but fairly reeked of disuse.

I sat on the side of the bed, which had obviously been smoothed out before I arrived. "Anything I can do for you, Laura, just say the word."

"That's why I had Doris call you, Ian. I didn't want to call myself, she would have heard what I said, and I wouldn't hurt her for the world. I've known her since she was a little girl, used to babysit her, you know."

I crossed my legs. She would eventually get to the point.

"Anyway, I wanted to ask you a favor. I'll have to stay here tonight. Doris would

never understand if I refused. But tomorrow I'd like to go back to the house and get some clothes and then get a room at the motel until after the funeral. I'd rather not go into the house alone. Would you come with me? They will let me get some clothes, won't they?"

"I'm sure they will; I'll check it out with Jack when he comes by in the morning. But, Laura, are you sure you want to be in a motel? It will be even more depressing than..." Then here is what I was about to say as my eyes traveled the room, but I thought better of it.

Laura noticed my wandering glance and smiled slightly. "It isn't that, believe me. I'd like some peace and quiet, and I don't like to impose on my friends. I'd prefer not to stay here and, of course, no way could I bear to stay at the house."

Although a talker, Laura was, thank heavens, neither foolish nor the weepy, helpless type. I could sympathize with her not wanting to spend undue time at the Chapings' with Whit storming in and out at odd hours. She had no family except a niece someplace up north, and I could understand her not wanting to impose on friends.

Before I could disengage my sympathy and switch into neu-

tral, I heard my mouth saying, "Nonsense, you can't stay alone at a motel. Remember my old studio behind the garage? The kids have converted that into a cosy guest apartment. You can stay there for a few days, come and go as you please, complete privacy but I'll be right next door if you need anything."

From her look of surprise I could see the idea had not occurred to her. She hesitated but a second and then, with obvious relief and no dithering, she thanked me and said she would walk down in the morning.

A half hour later I rounded the bend of the lane en route to home. In the dwindling light I could see some figures gathered round a car and a motorcycle up ahead where the lane and county road met. I was about to turn into my drive when the cyclist detached himself from the group and roared toward me.

The bike came to a gravel-splattering halt beside me. Balanced with one foot on the ground, Whit removed his helmet, then seemed not to know how to begin.

The last time I'd seen him this close was long before I'd moved east when he'd been a somewhat chubby preteenager. Now at nineteen he was lanky, with unruly black hair, a thin face, and unhappy blue eyes.

He examined his foot with intense interest and blurted out, "Do they know what happened to Mr. Faxton? I mean, I know he was killed, but do they know what happened?" He looked at me for a second before returning his attention to his foot. In that brief glance I caught a look of sheer pain.

I answered rather abruptly, "The police don't confide in me, Whit."

My initial thought was that his pals up at the corner had delegated him to find out the gruesome details. Televisionlike violence in their own back yard. All this and heaven, too. Then that glimpse of pain registered, and I tried to soften my reply. "It happened this morning, Whit, only a few hours ago. I expect they are still sorting out the pieces."

"Yeah, I guess." For a second he looked me straight in the eye. "He was okay. Mrs. F., too. Tell her I'm sorry."

The unexpected concern and unquestionable sincerity stunned me. He had donned his helmet, turned the bike around, and started to rev up before I could speak. I yelled after him, "I'll tell her. Drop by and see me when you get a chance." There was little hope he could hear me above the din as he headed back to the road.

My first conscious thought the next morning concerned Whit. Everyone I had talked with since my arrival had indicated Whit was wild, callous, and on a self-destructive course. Come to think of it, though, his name hadn't come up in conversation with Stan and Laura. I had assumed they shared the consensus, if I had thought of it at all.

I made a mental note to query Laura. Meantime I hustled about like a conscientious housewife, turning on the small refrigerator in the pullman kitchen of the guest suite, digging out appropriate linens, feeding the animals. I was about to wash the car when Jack arrived.

He took the key and returned a half hour later with the nonews that indeed it was the one to the Faxtons' front door. I relayed Laura's request, and he assured me she could pick up some clothing and necessities later in the morning. "As a matter of fact, I was about to go up to see her," he said. "We'd like her to take a more careful look around to be sure nothing is missing."

"You haven't eliminated robbery as a motive, then?"

A shrug. "We're working on it."

He certainly was not a mine of information. I was sifting my

mind for some bait to entice him to open up when Dumpling arrived. Her usually precisely groomed Margaret Thatcher hairdo was flattened and her pink pants suit rumpled, but she seemed in control.

"Good morning, Ian, Jack." She addressed Jack. "Has Ian told you I'd like to get some things from the house?" Jack acknowledged having received the request and suggested they go over to the house now and "get it over with."

We entered her house through the front door, and with me tagging behind, Jack and another deputy escorted her around, checking drawers and closets. She confirmed that nothing was missing. I noticed that one or the other unobtrusively watched as she pattered between bedroom and bath, gathering up toiletries and clothing and packing them in a large suitcase.

She turned to Jack's sidekick before closing the case. "Would you like to take a closer look before I shut this, officer, to ensure that I'm not absconding, is that how one terms it, with the evidence?" The deputy shook his head and exchanged an amused look with Jack. Age and grief notwithstanding, Dumpling missed little.

Jack, Laura, and I repaired to my house, where Jack sug-

gested they could talk more comfortably. Once there, I offered to absent myself, but Laura insisted I stay. Jack offered no objections.

That evening I couldn't resist calling Lee again to catch her up on the day's happenings, starting with my visit to the Chapings' house the previous evening. I described the uninviting guest room. "I'd never been in the house before. They tend to keep to themselves. The rest of the house, or what I saw of it, is uninspiring. Comfortable enough, but no feminine touches. Definitely a man's house."

Lee, as usual, refined my impressions. "The man's castle, and the little woman cleans, cooks, and fetches beer but does not intrude her personality."

"You've got it."

"What is the 'king' like?"

"Chet? He's quite ordinary looking. Medium height and build, roundish face, slitty eyes, full lips. He's the only person I've ever met who actually says 'ha, ha, ha,' his version of a laugh."

"No sense of humor."

"None whatsoever. He's a dentist to boot." We both laughed. Lee knew I'd rather skinny-dip in frigid shark-infested waters than visit a dentist's office, though I did so once a year simply as a test of char-



acter and, let's face it, because I wanted to remain attached to my ivories.

"So what did Laura have to say today?"

"Jack took her through yesterday morning minute by minute. She and Stan got up early as usual, did their morning routines. She made a pie and put it in the oven, then left to take a book up to Doris. Stan was in the den when she left, putting his computer back together."

"What was wrong with the computer?"

"Nothing. He'd taken it up to the computer place the day before to have some new software installed on the hard disk. He'd tried to do it himself but loused it up. According to Laura, he could follow simple software operating instructions but was as flummoxed as most of us when it came to reading the manual. Anyway, when she left he was in the process of reattaching the cables. She was gone about a half hour and, when she got back, found herself locked out. You know the rest."

When I related the exchange with Whit, Lee wanted to know if I'd mentioned it to Laura.

"No, by the time Jack finished with her, she was exhausted, and I hadn't the heart to put her through more ques-

tioning. She went up to the studio to rest. Later on in the afternoon there was a steady stream of visitors, all carrying casseroles of one kind or another. She brought some of the stuff down here, and I stuck it in the freezer. We could open a restaurant."

"At least neither of you will have to cook for a while."

"Fat chance. You know me and casseroles. A bunch of mixed up, overcooked stuff swimming in canned soup is not for me."

"Picky."

"Selective," I automatically replied.

The next day and a half were relatively quiet. I saw little of Dumpling. My fears that she would be hovering around the house chatting up a storm proved groundless. Off and on, strange cars would be parked in the drive, friends come to commiserate, and once I noticed a sheriff's car departing, but they all used the side entrance to the studio and I was not disturbed. The bricks Lyle had ordered for a patio off the master bedroom arrived, and I was busy fulfilling my offer to lay them.

Each morning I was up with the dawn, installing the wood edgings before the intense heat set in. By noontime of the second day I had most of them in

place and was about to retreat to the cool house when I heard an unmistakable roar. A minute later Whit sauntered around the corner of the house.

He leaned against the live oak that shaded the area. "You said to drop by, but if you're busy . . ."

"No, no. I was just quitting. Too hot. Come on in where it's cool."

He followed me into the kitchen, accepted my offer of some iced tea, and followed me into the living room. I settled into one of the blue upholstered chairs, and he perched at the end of the blue and white sofa.

He looked around approvingly at the muted blue carpet, thick glass coffee table, lithographs on the wall. "Nice," he said.

My daughter-in-law has excellent taste. The room was both stylish and eminently comfortable. I wondered if the boy was mentally comparing it with his folks' drab surroundings.

Apparently so because he continued, "Blue is Mom's favorite color, but my father says it's not practical."

There was an uneasy silence while we both worried that tidbit. We were getting nowhere, so I decided to jump in with both feet. "You seemed pretty

upset at Stan's death. Did you know him well?"

For a second I thought the lad was going to cry. He rubbed his nose with the back of his hand and searched the carpet as if looking for a hole to crawl into. "Yeah, we talked sometimes."

"And Mrs. Faxton?" I prodded. Man the engines, full steam ahead.

"Well, sure, she was usually there, and sometimes during the day she comes up to see Mom. My father says she's like a cackling hen and he doesn't know how Mom puts up with her, but that's just her way. Mrs. Faxton's, I mean. She talks just to be friendly, and she is not dumb."

This last was said with defiance and gave a clue as to Chet's other comments regarding Laura. Whit took a sip of iced tea and looked at me.

"The police came up to the house last night asking all sorts of questions about where I was the morning Stan was killed and about the robberies that have been going on."

"Oh?" I noted that Mr. Faxton had now become Stan.

"Mr. MacLadd, I did not have anything to do with those robberies, and I did not have anything to do with Stan's murder. Mrs. Faxton knows that, I hope." He put down his glass

and stood up. Obviously he'd said what he came to say and wanted to get out.

"Whit, it never occurred to me you might be involved in Stan's death, and I'm sure Laura had no such thoughts either." I couldn't disclaim previous suspicions regarding the robberies because Lyle had told me some of the neighbors thought Whit might be involved. Lyle himself was for giving Whit the benefit of the doubt on the premise that wildness is not synonymous with dishonesty.

"Don't worry about it, Whit. Once you've told the police where you were Wednesday morning and at the times the robberies took place, they'll check it out and drop it."

"I couldn't tell them that." He opened the door, thanked me for the iced tea, asked that I tell Laura what he'd said, and off he went.

And there I stood. Knowing less than I had to begin with. Why all the mystery, for Pete's sake? Had he been involved in the robberies? No, he vowed he hadn't. Experience over a relatively long life had taught me to recognize truth when I heard it. Was he involved with some girl? That was probably it and he didn't want to drag her into it, or perhaps he didn't want his folks to know.

Time to tackle Laura and find some answers. A check of the driveway revealed her car and a blue Toyota. She had company. I made myself a ham and cheese sandwich, watched the latest on CNN, then showered, changed my clothes, grabbed Lyle's golf clubs, and headed out for nine holes of masochism. The Toyota was gone when I returned late in the afternoon. I knocked on the studio door and invited Laura over for a drink if she felt up to it.

A half hour later she arrived looking drawn but more her old self. She sipped her Chablis and nibbled at the peanuts while chatting on about the kindness of various friends and the funeral arrangements. It seemed Stan had been adamant in his dislike of funerals. He had wanted to be cremated and have a simple graveside service. She intended to abide by his wishes as soon as the police released the body.

"I'm sorry, Ian. I've done nothing but chatter away since I arrived. Stan used to call me his bubbling brook when I ran on like this."

Given an opening, I brought up the subject uppermost in my mind. "Whit came by today. He seems very upset by what's happened."

"Poor Whit. I'll call Doris tomorrow and ask her to tell him to come to see me. No, tomorrow's Sunday, isn't it? Chet will be home. It will have to wait until Monday."

"Why? Doesn't Chet allow phone calls?"

"He doesn't like his weekends disturbed, and of course he doesn't know about Whit."

"I beg your pardon?" What was going on here? Not only did I not know the score; at this point I wasn't sure which teams were playing.

"Chet would be furious that we've been helping Whit."

"What it amounts to," I told Lee during what had now become a nightly call, "is that the 'king' is a Tyrant with a capital T. It explains a lot. I'd noticed that Whit refers to Doris as Mom but Chet is 'my father,' never 'Dad.' Apparently the two barely tolerate each other."

"Whit's of age, why doesn't he move out?" Lee asked.

"That was my first reaction. According to Laura, there is a history of physical abuse in that household. She dragged the truth out of Doris one day. Although Whit has never admitted it in so many words, from comments he let slip, Laura and Stan figured he was sticking around to protect his mother. He's too big now for Chet to beat up on, and if Chet

takes after Doris, Whit bares his fangs and Chet backs off."

"What a joyous atmosphere to grow up in. Now tell me, how were the Faxtons helping?"

"As you can imagine, it took Laura a couple of hours to tell me, but out of kindness to my telephone bill I'll condense it. Once she and Stan discovered what was going on up there, it cast a new light on Whit's behavior: Stan went out of his way to try to cultivate the kid, hiring him to do odd jobs, talking to him about his work as a geologist, which seemed to fascinate Whit.

"With their help and encouragement Whit got his GED and has been taking classes at the junior college. He hopes next year to transfer to the state university. Meantime Stan got him a part-time job with a well-driller friend of his. The Faxtons gave him that second-hand motorcycle as a reward for the GED and so he'd have cheap transportation to class and work."

"And Chet knows nothing about any of this," Laura said.

"According to Laura, he'd blow sky-high if he knew. Somebody muscling in on his power base. She's just afraid that Whit's determination might flag now that Stan's gone."

"Any new developments on the murder?"

"Not so far as I know, but everyone is a little antsy. Whit thinks they suspect him, and Laura was questioned again."

"What do you think?"

"I think it was done by culprit or culprits unknown. I don't believe it was Laura or Whit because I do not want it to be either of them and, more rationally, because neither would have anything to gain. Whit would seem to have had a lot to lose, and if Dumpling had wanted to be rid of hubby, it is doubtful she'd have waited fifty-one years."

"You're sounding testy."

"Played nine holes this afternoon, lost two balls, and my score almost equaled my age. Couldn't get my mind off this business with Stan. How did the killer get out?"

"Possibly the same way you got in."

"No, that wouldn't work. It would have been even harder to get out because that window is high above the tub. The screen was in place. There would have been some trace, and whoever it was didn't have that much time. Laura was gone only thirty or thirty-five minutes."

"Why don't you find an excuse to go over tomorrow and nose around?" Lee had always been as bugged as I by unsolved

puzzles. She was itching to know the solution to this one and would have given much to be able to snoop around herself.

As it happened, Laura approached me the next morning while I was watering the plants in the driveway island. She was going to her house to pick up some insurance papers, and I offered to accompany her. With the permission of the police she had someone go in and clean up the mess in the living room but she admitted she still felt uneasy being in the place alone.

While Laura rummaged around in the desk drawers, I roamed the house looking for I knew not what. Returning to the den, I unlatched the sliding door and tried to open it, but it was wedged at the bottom by a length of three-fourths-inch pipe. I picked up the pipe, leaned it against the door-frame, slid open the door and the screen, and wandered outside, sliding closed the glass door behind me to keep the heat out.

The patio was a cement slab, rectangular shaped, about two hundred square feet. Cushioned redwood chairs were arranged in a rough semicircle facing the woods. Between patio and woods on the left was a small vegetable garden, straight ahead was a flowerbed, and to the right under an old

oak were benches and a hammock strung between the tree and the house. Nothing could be seen beyond except trees and rock outcroppings. Anyone could leave or enter the house from back there witnessed only by birds, rattlesnakes, and squirrels.

I turned to reenter the house and found the glass slider locked. Now what the heck was going on? I could clearly see Laura sitting at the desk putting documents into a large brown envelope. Surely she hadn't dashed across the room, locked the door, and scurried back to the desk. I had been in plain sight within six feet of the door; she knew she wasn't alone.

When I tapped on the glass, she raised her head. "Come on in, I'm almost through," she yelled.

Her smile turned to a look of bewilderment when I pointed to the lock on the door and yelled back with some irritation, "I can't, the door is locked."

She approached the door, shaking her head. "Well, I didn't lock it." Then she pointed at the locking lever, which was in the open position. "See, it isn't locked. Oh, for heaven's sake." As if on cue, we both looked down. The pipe that I had left leaning against

the jamb had slid down into the threshold between the rails and wedged the door closed.

After Dumpling had dislodged the pipe and admitted me to the room, she said, "It must have slid down by itself."

"If so, that solves the puzzle of how our intruder left the house. Let's see if we can make it do it again." I propped the pipe up with one end in the channel of the threshold and the other leaning against the jamb and opened and closed the slider. Nothing. I tried the pipe at different angles, and on the fourth try it slid down into the channel when I slammed the glass door shut.

"It apparently has to be at just the right angle to slide down. I accidentally did it, and presumably so did the intruder. We had better let the police know."

A couple of hours later Jack met me at the Faxtons'. Laura was resting, and I'd volunteered to demonstrate our discovery. After several attempts the pipe slid down as before.

"Laura tells me," I told Jack, "that two or three weeks ago they had had trouble with the door sticking so she'd vacuumed and washed out the channel and Stan had sprayed the railings with some kind of lubricant. Obviously some of it got in the channel and made it

slippery enough so if placed at just the right angle the pipe will slide down."

Jack scratched his head. "Simple as that, who'd have thought it. The killer left in a hurry and slammed the door closed, which jarred the pipe into sliding down. That also explains why the screen was partly open. In his rush, the killer didn't bother to close it. It didn't make any sense before because we thought no one could have left by this door. Well, that about wraps it up, I guess."

"What do you mean? Do you know who did it?"

"We've had our suspicions for several days. Don't let on I told you now, but we're pretty sure it's that young buck Whit, down the lane. He couldn't account for his whereabouts that morning or, for that matter, when the robberies took place. He's a wild one, you know. A couple of years ago he was smashing up cars right, left, and center."

"That was a couple of years ago, Jack. As far as accounting for his whereabouts, you might find that 'wouldn't' is more accurate than 'couldn't.'"

"If he had an alibi, he'd have told us. Look, Mr. MacLadd, this is murder. The kid's not that dumb that he'd play coy at a time like this."

"He is neither stupid, Jack, nor playing games. Right now I think he feels trapped between a rock and a hard place. But let's leave that for a moment. Something has been bothering me. I noticed in the news stories they said that Stan had been working on his computer before the murder."

"That's right," Jack said.

"Supposedly nobody, except the police, Laura, and me, knows that he wasn't operating the computer as the stories imply but was actually putting it back together after having dismantled it to take it to the shop. Is that right?"

"That's right unless you or Mrs. F. talked. We asked you to keep the details to yourselves."

"I assure you we've been mute on the subject. Dump . . . I mean Mrs. Faxton does chatter a bit, but she knows how to talk and say nothing. Do you have pictures of the den?"

I hadn't seen the den on the murder day. At my request Jack took me down to the station and produced the pictures taken of the scene. Pushing aside the gory ones taken in the living room I concentrated on those taken of the den. Jack wouldn't let me borrow the photos but with a little persuasion he consented to return with the pictures to my house so that we could have Laura look at them.



We gathered around the small table in the studio and I asked Laura to examine the den photos carefully and tell us if anything was different from the way it looked when she left the morning of the murder to visit Doris.

"Let me see. The base was on the desk back to front as it is in the picture. The monitor was on the floor when I left. You can see Stan must have put it on the desk to attach the cables after I left. Everything else looks the same except, of course, the keyboard is missing."

"Do you remember where the keyboard was when you left?"

"Yes, it was right there." She pointed to the easy chair to the right of the desk. "I put it there myself. Stan had placed it on the floor while he was fiddling with the cables, and I was afraid one of us would step on it."

I thanked Laura and ushered Jack out. At the studio door we encountered a pseudo-blonde matron carrying a pie. It looked good. Lyle's freezer and I had begun to believe that casseroles alone were considered socially acceptable for mourning. I held the door for her to enter, and Jack and I repaired to the house.

Once there I told Jack my theory.

"Sounds logical to me," he said. "What I don't understand is what triggered the killing. Okay, so maybe it wasn't premeditated—everything points to an argument that got out of hand—but what was the argument about? What started it?"

I then told him how the Faxtons had been helping Whit. "I think you'll find that Whit kept quiet about his school because he didn't want his parents to know. He was afraid if he told his mother she might let something slip to Chet. Laura says Doris seems to be terrified of the man."

"And," Jack said, "if his father knew, he'd raise hell and kick him out, and that would leave his mother undefended. At the least he'd be furious with the Faxtons for interfering."

"That's about it." I said.

"I still don't understand it. You'd think they'd both have been delighted that Whit was straightening out and trying to make something of himself. Chaping's an educated man. Why wouldn't he want the same for his son?"

"Since when did education change basic character? Doris told Laura that Chet's always been jealous of Whit. Reading between the lines, I think you'll find one of the ways he's kept Doris cowed all these years is

by picking on the lad and threatening to kick him out periodically."

We chewed over the implications for a while longer, after which Jack left to discuss the situation with his chief and to check with Whit's employer and the junior college. Although he appeared to agree with my analysis, he needed to convince himself that Whit was in the clear.

Lee had a Friends of the Library meeting that night, so I skipped the call east. The next morning I was screening sand in a section of my patio project when Jack appeared.

"You were right, Sherlock. The kid was in class all that morning and was either in class or working on the robbery dates. We've picked up the father and got a warrant to search the house. The boys are at it now."

That evening I filled in the details for Lee. "Like a lot of bullies, Chet collapsed when pushed to the wall. It seems one of his patients was the original owner of the motorcycle and mentioned to Chet that he'd sold it to the old guy who lived near Chet. Chet put two and two together. Wednesday was his day off, and when Doris said Laura was coming up to drop off a book, Chet saw his chance to confront Stan alone. He took

a shortcut through the woods and, when he got to the back of Stan's house, saw Stan in the den. They had a row, and Chet got physical. The way the police reconstruct it, Stan, who was a good thirty years older than Chet, tried to escape, and Chet picked up the nearest weapon to hand, the keyboard, chased him into the living room, and bashed him with it. Stan fell against the hearth and that was it."

"But why close the slider? If I'd killed someone, I'd want out and not bother with niceties like closing doors," asked my ever-logical sibling.

"Oh, that was just a reflex. Back east in the winter we close doors to keep out the cold. Here in summer you automatically do it to keep out the heat. It never occurred to him to close the screen. The fact that the pipe slid down, wedging the door, was a happenstance that for a while sidetracked the investigation.

"At any rate, he raced home the back way. Doris thought he was cleaning the garage all that time. He had blood spatter on his trousers and had to change them, but he told her he had caught the old ones on something and ripped them. The police found them in one of the trash bags with debris from the garage."

"How did you guess it was Chet?"

"Child's play, my dear. Remember that evening I went up to their house to see Laura? Chet said some robber must have picked the keyboard off the chair to hit Stan. No one else knew it had been on the chair until Laura saw the pictures of the den and told us that was where she had put it before leaving the house."

"So what happens now to Doris and Whit?"

"Laura is taking them under her wing," I said, "and seems to be looking forward to playing mother and grandmother hen. I expect something will be worked out among the three of them."

And then for a while we discussed the latest building traumas at our respective abodes, after which I ambled into the kitchen to partake of my share of a delicious apricot pie under the hopeful gaze of my two four-legged charges.

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## **SOLUTION TO THE NOVEMBER "UNSOLVED":**

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Sheriff Fargo arrested Creole for the bank robbery. (Apparently he waited until after the big horse trade so he could have a *white* horse at the time of the arrest.)

<u>COWBOY</u>	<u>BEFORE TRADE</u>	<u>AFTER TRADE</u>	<u>NOTE</u>
Arky	Handy (white)	Lucky (roan)	
Bama	Joker (white)	Golly (roan)	
Creole	Golly (roan)	Ike (black)	bandit
Denver	Kicker (black)	Handy (white)	
El Paso	Lucky (roan)	Kicker (black)	
Fargo	Ike (black)	Joker (white)	sheriff

# THE BEST OF THE LOWLIFE GRIFTERS AND SWINDLERS

Edited by Cynthia Manson

## GRIFTERS AND SWINDLERS

STORIES BY

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JULIAN SYMONS · SIMON BRETT  
AND DONALD E. WESTLAKE,  
AMONG OTHERS



EDITED BY CYNTHIA MANSON

This entertaining book contains short stories about swindlers, grifters, and con men from all walks of life by a wide range of talent – including Simon Brett, Robert L. Fish, William Campbell Gault, David Morrell, Julian Symons,

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# MYSTERY CLASSIC

*From the Diary of a  
New York Detective  
— anonymous —*

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Vol. I.

DECEMBER, 1894.  
*Published Monthly.*

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### Book of Brief Narratives.

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NOTE: We depart this time (we think) from the fictitious crime tale to True Life. Some years ago, through the courtesy of two of our readers, Carolyn and Ed L. Smith of Wesson, Mississippi, we received a copy of a little magazine in their possession, found among Mrs. Smith's grandfather's papers. Its title page has been reproduced at left. As you can see, what follows—the entire contents of the magazine—was published in 1894.

It is said to be edited by Frank Pemmon. The detective in question is not identified.—ED.

### A Chance Meeting

Several years ago I was detailed to undertake the solution of a mystery surrounding a robbery which had baffled the police for a month or more. Then two detectives had been set to work upon it and had failed to locate the thief. I was given the case. I did not exactly succeed in finding the thief, but I brought him to justice just the same. How, you shall see.

The house of Mr. Bond had been broken into and a large amount of jewelry stolen. Among the latter was a handsome gold watch belonging to the daughter of Mr. Bond. It had been a birthday present from her mother and was highly prized by her. Her father offered a large reward for its recovery. I called at the home of Mr. Bond to get a description of the missing jewelry and whatever other information the family could give me. This was little enough. The jewelry had been stolen, and no trace of the thief was to be found. That was all. I was expected, with no clue whatever to work upon, to ferret out and bring the thief to justice, and at the same time recover Miss Bond's watch. The only thing that the thief had left behind him was a piece of paper on which was written the words "Remember the poor." I did not regard this as being of any importance, and gave it little or no thought.

I was a young man at the time, unmarried and, as it may be guessed, susceptible to the charms of pretty girls. Miss Bond—Clara—was a pretty girl, and I may as well confess I fell in love with her at first sight. I also made an impression upon her. This caused me all the more eagerly to work up the case and try to bring it to a successful conclusion. Who knows, thought I, what may be at the end of it? I made a good many visits to the Bond house,

nominally to seek information, in reality to gaze upon the face of the charming Miss Bond. My search for the thief did not progress very favorably. In fact, I had made no progress whatever. It promised to remain an unsolved mystery. I could not find the thief. Now comes the strange part of the story—how the thief found me. I had just boarded a railway train when a man followed me and quietly slipped into the seat next to me. He carried a small bag which he hid under the seat. I also had a bag somewhat similar to his own.

"Well, Jimmy," he remarked, "how did you succeed?"

"First rate," I returned, in a whisper so as not to betray my identity by my voice. It was clear that I was in conversation with a thief—he did not look to my well-trained eyes like an honest man—and I must keep up the deception.

"Got the swag?" he asked.

I merely tapped my bag for reply. It was nearly dusk, and the car lamps had not been lighted. My companion had not yet discovered his mistake. I didn't feel exactly flattered at being mistaken, even in the half light, for a thief.

"How with you?" I asked.

"Ain't done much since I tapped 'Remember the poor.'"

Remember the poor! The words flashed across my mind. Was I on the track of the thief at last?

"Got the watch yet?" I asked.

"Yes, don't dare try to get rid of it. Where is Baggy John, now?"

What the deuce was I to say? Just then a man came down the aisle. I saw at once it was the man whom my companion had really expected to meet. The resemblance between us was remarkable. My companion looked from one to the other and then tried to get away. Not before I had a pair of handcuffs encircling his wrists, the reward, and, last, but by no means least, my wife.

### How Was She Killed?

"If I ever do it, I'll do it that way."

These were the words I accidentally overheard one day, many years ago, as I was walking along the beach at one of our celebrated summer resorts. The person who uttered the above-mentioned remark, a young man of about twenty-eight or thirty, spoke only half aloud and was evidently unaware that there was anyone within hearing distance. It was not my purpose to play eavesdropper. I was in a thoughtful mood myself, and with my head bowed almost



upon my breast I had overtaken the young man and overheard his words. He had been reading a paper-covered novel of the sensational kind. As I passed him, I glanced at the title. It was *How Was She Killed?* I passed on my way as if I had not heard anything, and the young man turned to his book, in which he was evidently much interested. I had taken a sufficiently good look at the man to enable me to recognize him again. My memory for faces and forms is very good. On my return to the hotel, I saw a number of copies of *How Was She Killed?* on sale. Partly out of curiosity I bought one and read it. I was afterward glad I did so.

Two years after the incident just narrated, I was detailed to undertake the solution of a mystery surrounding the death of an unknown young lady. She had been found dead in the woods. It looked like a case of suicide by poison, as there were no marks of any kind upon the body to show that death had been the result of violence. An examination of the stomach was held, but there was no trace of poison in it. It was in a perfectly healthy condition. There was nothing to show that death had resulted from natural causes. If it was a case of suicide, how had the act been committed; if of murder, how had the murderer done his work? No one claimed the body; and it lay for several days in the morgue.

The examination of the doctors and others had evidently not been of a very thorough nature. I examined the body myself very carefully and found what they had apparently overlooked—a tiny mark near the heart, so small that at first sight it was not observable. At my request the heart was opened and examined. The result was as I had expected. The organ contained a fine steel needle, pointed at both ends. This was what had caused the unfortunate woman's death. She had been murdered, and the murderer had done his work in such a manner as to allay all suspicion—almost. I immediately thought of the sensational novel *How Was She Killed?* The victim in that story had met her death at the hands of her lover in exactly this way. Had this young lady a lover or anyone who wished to get her out of the way? It was a week before she was identified, and when she was, her lover—a scheming rascal—was found to be no other than the man I had encountered two years before and had overheard make the remark with which this story opens. It was an easy task to prove him guilty of the murder of his sweetheart, and he saved himself from the gallows only by committing suicide after his trial and conviction.

\*

## It Was Not Murder

Old Farmer Bunker lived alone. His wife had died years ago, and he had never married. He had no children. People said he ought not to live alone, that something was certain to happen to him; robbers would break into his house and steal his valuables and perhaps kill him. For once the people happened, so it seemed, to be right. One morning Mr. Bunker was found dead in his bed, and an ugly knife wound over the heart seemed to tell only too plainly what had been the cause of his death. An autopsy was not considered necessary. The services of a detective rather than those of the medical examiner were called into requisition. I was the detective detailed to look into the case. The first thought was that robbery had been committed. An examination of the house failed to show any evidence that such had been the intention of the murderer. Apparently nothing had been disturbed. A bureau draw containing a large sum of money had not even been opened. Then it was thought that the old man must have committed suicide. A search was made for the implement with which he had committed the deed, but it was nowhere to be found. It was certain that death had been almost instantaneous, and of course Mr. Bunker could not have had time to hide the instrument of self-destruction. It was, therefore, unmistakably a case of murder.

I began an immediate and most thorough and systematic search for the murderer. Although Mr. Bunker had lived alone, he was neither a miser nor a crank and did not appear to have had an enemy in the world. The crowds that flocked to the house came to view the body of their old friend, and to express a wish that his murderer be brought to speedy justice. Motives of mere curiosity did not actuate many of them. From several of them I gathered a number of clues, all of which pointed to one conclusion, namely, that a tramp had been seen coming from the direction of the Bunker farm early in the morning of the day on which the body of Mr. Bunker had been found. I now directed my efforts to trace and locate the tramp. On the next day I had him in custody. He had not gone far. He made some very extraordinary statements. He said that Mr. Bunker was his friend, and that he had not killed him. When searched, he had in his possession over twenty dollars in bills. He was also known to have sent thirty dollars to somebody in Virginia. This money he claimed had been given to him by Mr.

Bunker. He furthermore claimed that he was not a tramp but a machinist in search of work.

"Was an autopsy held upon the body of Mr. Bunker?" inquired the suspected man.

"No; the cause of death was too plainly apparent."

"I thought as much. If an autopsy had been held, it would have shown that Mr. Bunker died a natural death."

I was impressed with the man's sincerity. He seemed to be no ordinary tramp, and I was convinced that he was telling the truth as he believed it.

At my request an autopsy was held. The result of it went to prove that Mr. Bunker's death occurred from apoplexy, and he was dead several hours before the knife wound in his heart had been inflicted.

"You evidently did not kill Mr. Bunker," I said, "but do you know anything about the knife wound which we supposed caused the death?"

"Yes," replied the tramp, "I inflicted it myself."

"You! Why did you do it?"

"I'll tell you."

And he told the following story:

### *The Tramp's Story*

"Joseph Bunker and I have been friends from boyhood. We always lived near each other and grew up together. We never quarreled as most boys will. The families of both of us were in well-to-do condition. The war came and reduced us to poverty. I forgot to tell you that we were natives of and then living in Virginia. After the war I learned the trade of a machinist, while Mr. Bunker wandered north to try his luck. He succeeded pretty well, I have reason to believe, far better than I have. The incident I have to relate occurred just before he left for the North. Joseph's father died. There are a number of people in Virginia who, as perhaps you know, have a peculiar custom as regards the treatment of their dead. Before burial, in order to guard against the terrible possibility of burying their friends alive while seeming to be dead, they run a dagger through the heart. The Bunker family, as well as mine, had always adhered to this custom. Joseph Bunker, however, was an exception to the general rule. He believed the custom to be as unnecessary as it was revolting. He chose to accept the

word of the doctors that his father was really dead and did not believe there was any possibility or probability of his being in a trance. He refused to allow his father's remains to be mutilated, as he called it. It was wintertime when his father died. It was an unusually severe winter, and to dig a grave was out of the question. So the body was deposited in the receiving vault to wait for spring. In the spring a grave was dug and everything made ready for the burial. Just previous to the interment, Joseph expressed a desire to look once more upon the face of his dead parent. The casket was opened, and a most horrifying sight met the gaze of those who stood around. The corpse, as it was believed to be, had evidently come to life, and in the struggle to get out of the casket, the lid of which had been only too securely fastened down, Mr. Bunker had torn his hair out by the handfuls, and had torn to shreds the interior furnishings of his narrow prison. Strong man though he was, Joseph Bunker fainted away and did not recover consciousness until the body of his father had been buried. He and I alone remained by the graveside when the others had gone. We then and there made a solemn vow that the survivor should perform for the dead man—what the doctor should call the dead man—the office which my companion had neglected to perform in the case of his father. Shortly afterwards, as I have said, Joseph Bunker went north. A week ago I wandered into this neighborhood, partly in search of work and partly to pay a visit to my old friend. I had his address, for we had always been in communication with each other. In nearly all of his letters of late, he referred to the fact that his health was failing and that he wished I could make it convenient to be present at his death. My visit to his house found him suffering from the effects of a recent shock of apoplexy. He told me he didn't think he had long to live. He spoke in truth. He died that very night, a few minutes after midnight. His last words were: 'Don't forget our vow, old friend.' I hadn't forgotten, but I put off doing the unwelcome work until I was certain my old friend was dead. I waited five hours, then I fulfilled my vow. I was afraid to be found with the dead body. People would not believe my story, I feared. So I struck off and got away as far from the place as possible; guilty of no crime, yet fearing punishment at the hands of those who would perhaps not believe my story."

\*

## A Freight Car Adventure

The freight cars of the B. & R. Railroad were being systematically robbed. During one month in 1891, the railroad company lost over five thousand dollars in this way. It was impossible to catch the thieves. On several occasions the conductor, engineer, and brakeman had been shot at, and narrowly escaped death. The thieves used to board the train either before it left the freight yard or during one of its numerous stops along the road, and hold the train until they had secured what they wanted, thrown it off, usually in a lonely spot far from dwellings, and made their escape. On numerous occasions a posse of police were secreted on the trains, but on these nights (the robberies occurred always at night) the thieves failed to put in an appearance, evidently having learned that pains had been taken to give them a warm reception. I suspected something more than the railroad officials seemed to suspect, and when I was told to do my best to bring the thieves to justice, I laid my plans accordingly. I sought leave from the conductor to ride on his train in disguise.

"I can't allow you to do so without permission from headquarters," declared the conductor.

"But I want to try to capture the thieves who have been robbing this company's trains and shooting at you, and I haven't time to get the necessary permission," I protested.

The conductor still refused to let me ride.

"I must and shall ride on your train tonight," I said. "Tomorrow night I shall be a good many miles away, and I must carry out my orders tonight."

"I have my orders, too, to carry out," declared the conductor.

"I shall ride, nevertheless," was my parting shot.

I did not ride. I had no intention of doing so. There was nothing taken from the train that night.

On the following night I secreted myself in the train, disguised as a tramp. I lay in hiding in an empty hay car. At the various stopping places, I took careful note of what occurred. Nothing suspicious happened until we got about two miles beyond C—. Here the train slowed up, although there was no station anywhere in sight. From my post of observation I saw everything that occurred. The conductor and some of the brakemen broke open the door of a car in which, as I afterward learned, there was a big consignment of tobacco and cigars. A large quantity of this was thrown out.

Pretty soon one of the brakemen left his fellows and started rapidly away from the train. Hastily slipping from my place of concealment, I hurried after him. I had not taken half a dozen steps when a pistol shot whistled past my head. I stopped short, drew my revolver, and prepared to open fire upon those in my rear. Just as I turned, I saw the conductor take off his hat and, holding it in his hand, deliberately fire his revolver at it. On the morrow, he would doubtless tell a harrowing tale of adventure with train robbers, and show visible proof of his own narrow escape from death. I was immediately taken in charge by the train crew, and, it being part of my plan, I made no resistance. We had not gone many miles when the conductor came to me and magnanimously offered me my freedom and promised not to turn me over to the authorities if I would go quietly about my business.

"Why do you hold me prisoner?" I demanded.

"For complicity in robbing this train," replied the conductor coolly. "Your accomplice got away."

"Yours, you mean," I remarked.

"Who'll believe that story?"

The conductor did not suspect my identity. He put me off the train. If he had known who I was, my life would probably not have been worth ten cents.

I hurried to the nearest station, hunted up the telegraph operator, and when the robbed train reached the end of its run, there were several policemen on hand to put the conductor and his accomplices under arrest.

## Two Ghosts

The following extraordinary story came under my observation some years ago.

Tom Johnson and Jack Spencer were close friends. One evening in Johnson's room they played cards, and Spencer won every cent Johnson had. Spencer was visiting his friend at the time, and retired to sleep with him. Sometime after midnight Spencer awoke feeling very uncomfortable. There was a strange silence in the room. Johnson, usually a loud snorer, was sleeping as quietly and peacefully as a baby. Was he really sleeping or was he dead? This question flashed across Spencer's mind. He leaned toward his friend to ascertain whether he was breathing. He was not. He felt for his heart. It was not beating. He raised his friend's head from

the pillow. It dropped back, heavy as lead. The limbs were stiff. The rigor mortis had already come upon the body.

Johnson must have committed suicide, thought Spencer, aghast. It's all on account of his losing so much money at cards. Now that it has been impressed upon me, I recall his strange remark on saying goodnight. It was, "Well, if I should die tonight, goodbye, old fellow." And he seemed quite despondent. I also saw him drink something out of a small phial, poison, no doubt. What shall I do? I have been indirectly the cause of his committing suicide. I won all his money at cards—money which he no doubt had intended to devote to some special purpose. How can I face his mother under such circumstances? I cannot and shall not. I'll get out of the way for a few days, until I recover from the shock of this terrible affair.

Another impulse came to him, and he proceeded to act upon it. He took nearly all the money from his pocket and put it on the table, where the friends of the dead man would be sure to find it. He also placed near it a note, inscribed as follows: "Please use this money to defray the funeral expenses. Spencer."

Then he quietly left the house, and he took the first train from the city. He eagerly scanned the evening papers next day for news of the finding of the dead body of Johnson. There was nothing to that effect, but instead he read the following item concerning himself:

IS IT SUICIDE?

*John Spencer has mysteriously disappeared and is supposed to have committed suicide. Before committing the rash act, he left a sum of money which he directed to be used for defraying the burial expenses. The ponds in the neighborhood are being dragged in the hope of finding the body.*

His surprise on reading the above can readily be imagined. He returned home immediately. Almost the first person he met was his friend Johnson.

Spencer staggered and put his hand to his head. Was he awake? Johnson showed similar signs of surprise.

"Then you didn't commit suicide," said Johnson.

"And you are not dead?" returned Spencer.

"Dead? Certainly not."

"But I left you for dead in bed last night."



"Dead! You must have been dreaming."

"No; you were pulseless and cold and stiff."

"Ah," said Johnson, "that is easily explained. I was simply in one of my cataleptic fits. No wonder you thought I was dead."

"Yes, I thought you had committed suicide."

"That's what we all thought about you. What did you leave the money for?"

"Why, to pay your funeral expenses."

"Well, since I don't need it, I shall return it," said Johnson. "I was afraid I'd have to use it to pay yours."

"I am glad it has all turned out so happily, old fellow," said Spencer, and the two ghosts shook hands.

### He Addressed the Jury

A man who had never seen the inside of a courtroom until he was introduced as a witness in a case pending in one of the Scottish courts, on being sworn, took a position with his back to the jury and began telling his story to the judge.

The judge, in a bland and courteous manner, said, "Address yourself to the jury, sir."

The man made a short pause, but, notwithstanding what had been said to him, continued his narrative.

The judge was then more explicit and said to him, "Speak to the jury, sir; the men sitting behind you on the benches."

The witness at once turned around and, making an awkward bow, said with perfect gravity:

"Good morning, gentlemen."

# BOOKED & PRINTED

- by Mary Cannon



**T**he latest in a super private eye series by L. L. Enger is **Sacrifice** (Pocket, \$4.99). Like the three earlier books, this one features former pro baseball star Gun Pedersen and takes its title from America's favorite pastime. Two weeks before their wedding, Gun and Carol Long find themselves heading toward his tiny hometown of Copper Strike, Michigan, to attend a funeral. The demolition of Gun's old high school dugout has unearthed the skeleton of young Harry Summers, whose sudden disappearance way back in 1969 has never stopped being a point of speculation among the townsfolk. Now Harry's back home, but the mystery only deepens as the grave also gives up a set of keys that once belonged to Gun's taciturn Scandinavian father—as well as the old man's hammer in the boy's skull. Enger gives readers a telling portrait of smalltown life in rural America with its complex relationships and old secrets, adding in some heart-stopping action, and all rendered in a crisp writing style. Who could ask for more?

The fourth Jane Lawless mystery by Ellen Hart is **A Killing Cure** (Seal Press, \$19.95), and it's a must-read for readers who appreciate sophisticated psychology, a fair-play puzzle, snappy repartee, and a soupçon of action. When the chairwoman of the board of the Amelia Gower Women's Club is battered to death, it looks as if the founder's great-grand-nephew is the culprit, so Jane's lawyer father assumes the boy's defense. When the club's second board member, elderly Rose Gower, falls to her death soon thereafter, the surviving board members ask restaurateur and amateur sleuth Jane to discreetly assure them that the deaths aren't related. Armed only with her instincts and her dubious Watson—the

zaftig Cordelia Thorn—Jane begins to discover the secret chambers in the heart of this respectable woman's club. As always, Hart's latest Jane Lawless thriller is a banquet for mystery lovers who are hungry for the real thing: a great yarn exceptionally well told, full of wit, passion, suspense, and a menu of strong, believable characters.

John le Carré's latest, **The Night Manager** (Knopf, \$21.95), deserves to win back all his old fans as well as garner him a number of new ones. What, you may ask, does a master of espionage write about now that the Russians aren't the bad guys any more? Try a charismatic, internationally powerful and enormously wealthy entrepreneur whose business is in drugs and the arms trade. Then pit him against an international network of law enforcement agencies whom he's managed to elude for years. Add a renegade good guy, a deadly conspiracy, and a fascinating protagonist who's recruited from his post as night manager of a posh hotel. Reminiscent of *The Little Drummer Girl*, this novel explores innocence and guilt through the night manager's adventure, and in him LeCarré has embodied a character whom this reader rooted for to the final pages.

Three recent novels should go a long way toward satisfying the tastes of history-cum-mystery lovers. Fans of Ellis Peters will appreciate a new title by an American medieval scholar, Sharon Newman. **Death Comes as Epiphany** (Tor, \$19.95) is set in twelfth century France. Young Catherine LeVendeur is a student novice at the Convent of the Paraclete, headed by the Abbess Heloise (of Heloise and Abelard fame). But her happiness and peace are in jeopardy: the abbess confides that a manuscript which Catherine herself worked on, and which was presented as a gift to a high church official, has been altered in such a way that the convent could be accused of heresy and even witchcraft. Catherine's mission is to return home to her parents, allegedly in disgrace, and then find the truth of the manuscript. A tapestry with colorful period detail, an intriguing plot, and a golden thread of romance.

Lindsey Davis continues her delightful Marcus Didius Falco series with **The Iron Hand of Mars** (Crown, \$20). Back again is the wisecracking P.I. of Vespasian's Rome, this time sent by his emperor to the wilds of Germany. Falco's not exactly traveling light. For one thing, he's lugging this huge iron hand, the emperor's token to honor the troops out there who have been holding the line. For another, he's encumbered with an unemployed court hairdresser who has stowed away. Finally, his heart is heavy, for

he not only fears that he has lost the fair Helena (a lady of rank with whom he's been dallying for several books now), but he's further weighted down with the knowledge of his real mission: to spy for Vespasian. As always, Falco manages to get himself in and out of increasingly hilarious and dangerous situations without ever losing his sense of humor—or his life.

Margaret Frazer continues her Sister Frevisse series with **The Servant's Tale** (Jove, \$4.50), the second in this excellent medieval series. It's Christmastime, 1434, and the sisters of the convent of St. Frideswide find themselves sharing the holidays with some wayfarers. A badly injured local man, husband of one of the convent's servants, has been brought in by a group of traveling players. The troupe members claim that his cart was overturned in a ditch, and that they merely carried him to the nearest shelter. The illness of the small boy traveling with them requires them to accept the convent's hospitality, even though it's clear that there is ill will among the townsfolk toward them and their kind. But events soon prove that there is indeed a murderer somewhere in the fold, and it's up to Frevisse to unmask the villain. Frazer richly dresses her tale with accurate period trappings and sensibilities, elegant writing, fascinating psychology, and a twist ending.

Jeremiah Healy has long been entertaining private-eye fiction fans with his John Francis Cuddy series, and his latest, **Four-some**, is another winner (Pocket, \$20). Steve and Sandy Shea and Hale and Vivian Vandemeer are up at the Sheas' lake place in Maine, a favorite new retreat for the four old friends. In fact, the couples' closeness is legendary; they are often called simply "The Foursome." But one night someone steals up and uses Steve's own bow to slaughter first Vivian, then Hale, and finally Sandy. Steve, meanwhile, had run down to the general store for a few last-minute items. When he returns home, he picks up the discarded bow lying in his path (getting his fingerprints all over it) and discovers the bodies of his wife and friends. His eerie keening brings his closest lakeside neighbor to the scene, and before the night is out he is in jail on suspicion of mass murder. The case is already famous in Boston, where both couples lived, by the time Cuddy is called in by Steve's Maine attorney to do the Boston legwork. One interview with Steve brings Cuddy around to the attorney's viewpoint: Steve has been framed. There's a druggie son, his gang-member girlfriend, a brother-in-law with a failing business, and Steve's own company managers. But is the answer in Boston, or up in the beautiful lake country of Maine? I won't say more, other than to

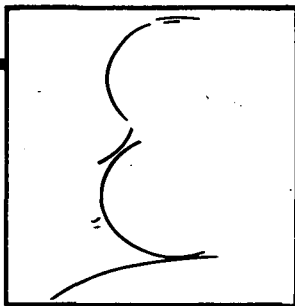
tell you that *Foursome* is a powerfully suspenseful private eye novel that you shouldn't miss.

A cross between an Elmore Leonard tale and a Carl Hiaasen story might be a good description for a first crime fiction novel by Pete Hautman. **Drawing Dead** (Pocket, \$20) stars Joe Crow, an ex-cop who can generally parlay his modest disability pension into something more substantial by his poker-playing abilities. Usually, that is. Then he finds himself in debt to Dickie Wicky, whose wife is named Catfish. Her auld acquaintances include two comic book con artists known to their former victims as "The Tom and Ben Show." Then there are the sadistic Chicago car dealer with mob connections and his likeable but stone-stupid henchman. There are more, such as Crow's illegitimate father, and his spike-haired but faithful upstairs neighbor. Add the mobster's moll, and the gung-ho realtor . . . get the picture? Suffice it to say that Hautman has penned a Keystone Kops caper novel that reads like a roller-coaster ride in a circus funhouse.

Patricia Cornwell continues her bestselling Kay Scarpetta series with **Cruel and Unusual** (Scribners, \$21), and it will go a long way toward adding to her legions of fans. The Commonwealth of Virginia has executed a convicted murderer, Ronnie Joe Waddell, and it is Kay's job as the medical examiner to autopsy the body. That same night a young boy is brutally murdered, his body left in a manner suggestive of the old killing that earned Waddell the electric chair. Soon a horrible doubt forms in the M.E.'s office: was the man the state killed the real Ronnie Joe Waddell? Cornwell has again devised an intriguing premise for her plot, and this time round Kay finds herself also battling to save her own career and reputation. Fans of the first three novels will be glad to hear that Lieutenant Marino and FBI agent Wesley are back, aided by Kay's precocious computer-whiz niece, Lucy. Be warned: once you open *Cruel and Unusual*, you won't want to stop for anything as mundane as eating or sleeping.

# MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



**R**ising Sun, a murder mystery, uses the Japanese takeover of a strategic American computer company as its backdrop. The film version of Michael Crichton's controversial bestseller delves into the seamy underbelly of Japanese corporate structure while exposing the sorry corruption of the American system. It stars Sean Connery and Wesley Snipes as the mismatched Los Angeles cops assigned to this touchy case.

The result is a conglomeration of ideas with enough plot twists to make one's head spin. And if you've read the novel, be ready for lots of changes, not the least of which is the identity of the killer.

Connery plays Zen cop John Connor, who's spent years in Japan after leaving the force under mysterious circumstances. He's fully versed in Japanese customs, strengths,

and weaknesses. On top of that, he's pals with the CEO of the powerful Nakamoto Company in whose offices the murder is committed.

Snipes is young gun Web Smith, who as Connor's partner is more prone to action than to fortune cookie philosophy. To him, patience is no virtue.

The two are inexplicably thrown together to investigate the murder of a "party girl" whose lifeless body is found draped over a boardroom table in the sparkling new Nakamoto tower while a star-studded gala goes on uninterrupted on the floor below.

The Japanese executives fear the murder could prove embarrassing and bad for business, which is heating up thanks to takeover talks with the American computer firm. Furthermore, due to the sensitive nature of the firm's work, the U.S. Congress must approve the

sale. Few tears are shed for the victim, played in the latest Sharon Stone-style by Tatjana Patitz.

As in Stone's most recent thriller *Sliver*, the murder is captured on video—in this case on video disc. (The trend in murder mysteries of using the latest technology to zero in on the killer has so far added little to the genre. What's next, murder by fax?)

When the Nakamoto people turn over a video disc of the murder—the building's security cameras naturally captured it all—the case is apparently closed. Unfortunately, it isn't, and the film drags on.

Questions arise over the video disc. Is it the original or a copy? Has it been doctored or edited? Is it real or is it Memorex? If you've ever wondered what pixels were, you'll get a briefing here.

More questions arise over the characters. Who's honest, who's corrupt? Where do everyone's loyalties lie? What's really at stake?

The investigation bounces from suspect to suspect like a pinball game, with little suspense or satisfaction. When the real killer finally is revealed, you'll want to smack yourself in the forehead and mutter, "Big deal."

Although the supporting cast, including Harvey Keitel

as Archie Bunkerlike cop Tom Graham and Cary-Hoyuki Tagawa as creepy corporate nemesis Eddie Sakamura, is first-rate, it cannot, nor can the stars, support this weak and confusing story.

It's almost impossible to believe, but the action takes place over only a few days. And while at times it seems to be in flashback form, most of the time the flashback technique is forgotten.

Neither Connor nor Smith uses much deductive reasoning. They are able to solve the mystery only with the help of a video disc expert, Jingo Asakuma (Tia Carrere), whose own bleak personal history gives viewers more to not care about.

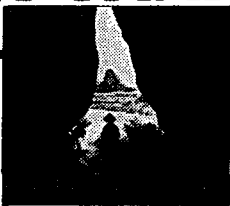
The pretty technological wizard is the daughter of a Japanese woman and a black American serviceman. She fell in love with a white American who left her because he couldn't take the heat.

The film is filled with such clutter—Smith too has his problems as a divorced father with custody of his daughter—which needlessly complicates matters.

Finally, don't see *Rising Sun*, rated R for violence and nudity, during the daytime. So much of it takes place at night or indoors, you risk being blinded by sunlight after it ends.



# THE STORY THAT WON



The July Mysterious Photo-Mike Mefferd of Rockford, to Catherine L. Finstein of Padraic Keohane of Orlando, Owensboro, Kentucky; E. B. California; James Sadlemyer

Canada; Art Cosing of Fairfax, Virginia; Maurice L. Schwartz of Bellingham, Washington; Michael C. McPherson of Fort McMurray, Alberta, Canada; A. Cooper of San Diego, California; and Charles D. Bowers, Jr., of Mulberry, Florida.

graph contest was won by Ohio. Honorable mentions go Warwick, Rhode Island; Sean Florida; Marty Clements of Parkell of San Francisco, of Odessa, Saskatchewan,

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## EYES IN THE BACK OF HIS HEAD by Mike Mefferd

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Jake whipped out a toothpick and sucked on it through his gleaming white teeth and fiendishly evil smile. He could see the faint silhouette of the sheriff through the outcropping of rocks ahead of him. Jake chuckled softly as the jingle of gold coins sounded the success of another victorious robbery. Young Jake also laughed at the futility of the aged Sheriff Tate and the cunning of youth. He could see the dark shadow traverse the dusty path, crouch, and scan the desert sands with its fingertips, finding Jake's footprint. Jake had made sure the tracks had led out to the desert, but had covered up the ones leading back. Now, as cunning Jake loaded the revolver, the grains of the hourglass had run out for Sheriff Tate.

The shot reverberated through the rocks and he fell to the ground with a muffled thump . . . and a tiny jingle. The sheriff massaged his aching knee joints and grinned under his salt-and-pepper hair and tired eyes. He was lucky he hadn't tripped over any rocks walking backwards like that. The sun and the rocks gave him shadows to confuse and slightly camouflage his movements. Sheriff Tate hefted the bag of coins in his hands and chuckled softly to himself, laughing at the futility of youth and the cunning of the elders.

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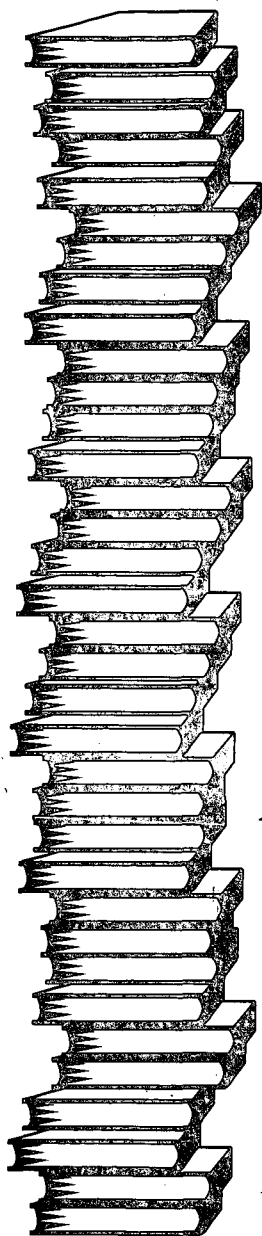
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